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The PC Gaming Authority

FOR OVER 20 YEARS ISSUE 263

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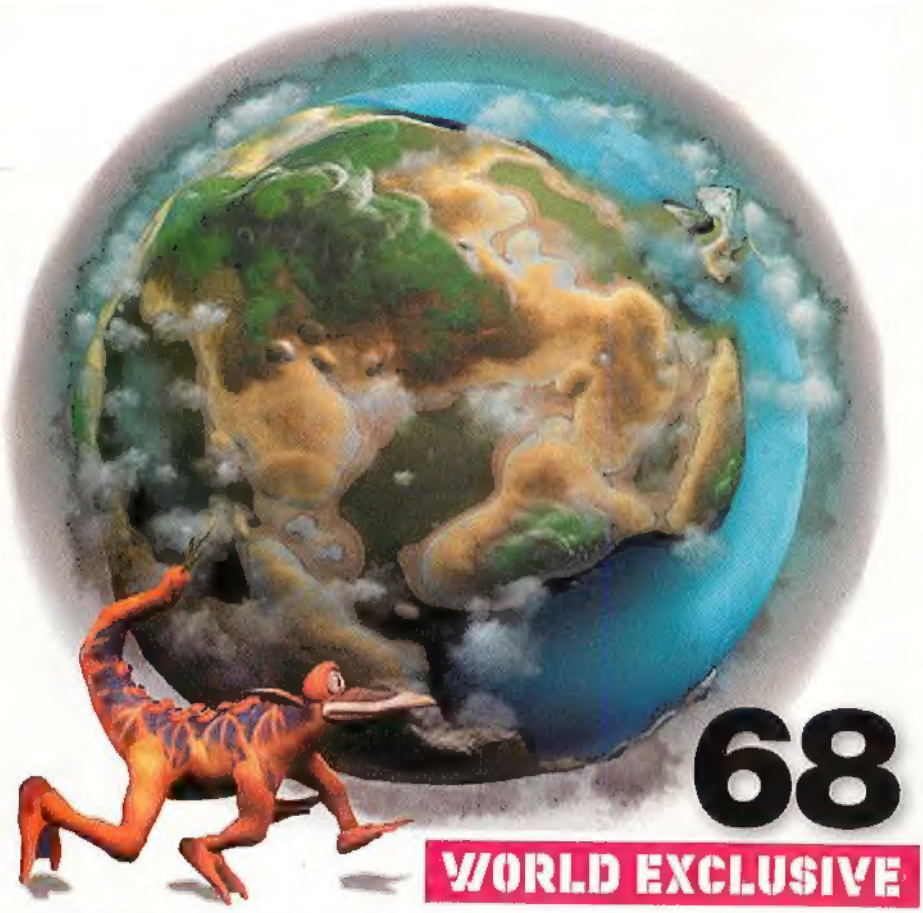
JUNE 2006 ISSUE #263



COVER STORY

SPORE

Will Wright and his team at Maxis already made the best-selling series in the history of videogames. Not content with that, they're now making a game that encompasses no less than the entire history of the universe. Show-offs! Join us for this world-exclusive first look at *Spore*—the game we've all been waiting to see. Yay!

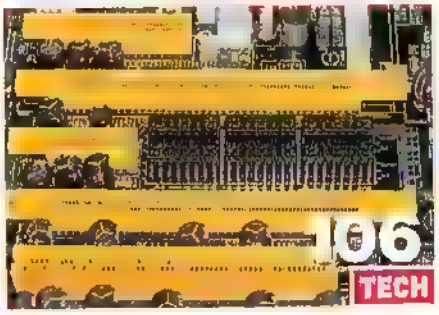
106 Tech

Every month, at least one person e-mails to ask, "So...which graphics card should I buy?" This month, we tackle this eternal question.

114 Greenspeak

Wait a sec. Who is that guy back there? Haven't we seen him somewhere before? Honey, call the cops.

GAME INDEX



THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

E3.1UP.COM

By the time you read this, E3 2006 should be well underway. Get up-to-the-minute E3 PC gaming news and previews here!

WWW.GAMEVIDEOS.COM

The newest member of the 1UP Network hosts not only the latest game trailers, but also machinima, speed runs, and all those wacky joke videos that get forwarded around the office.

CGWRADIO.1UP.COM

Why read what the CGW editors have to say when you can listen to their geeky, whiny voices instead? Join the fun and find out why all the girls are going wild.

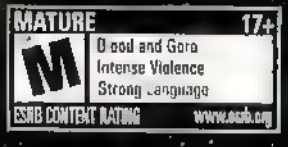
Praise for the Xbox 360™ release of Condemned: Criminal Origins

"The fact that Condemned is pushing the 360 is awesome but its clever tweak on the first-person genre and its grisly premise are what make it really tick."

8.5/10 – Official Xbox Magazine

"Each area features such rich textures, atmospheric lighting, and creepy ambiance that you'd swear that they were real."

8.75/10 – Game Informer



You are FBI Agent Ethan Thomas. To hunt the world's most dangerous serial killer you'll need to keep your eyes open. Starting now.

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CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

EDITOR.AL 263

SPORE SPORE SPORE

Spore Spore Spore Spore Spore Spore

WHAT DO I REALLY NEED TO SAY? WE HAVE *SPORE* on the cover. We've been pursuing this story ever since Will Wright first tipped his hand about it way back in 2005—and here we are at last, in a world-premiere exclusive. Yay!

If you think you might not have any interest in *Spore* because you were too cool for *The Sims*, I encourage you to read the story anyway, because you might just change your mind. And I don't just say that because I wrote it. Though that does help a little.

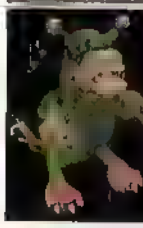
Actually, I can't take all the credit this time around, because the piece was, in fact, cowritten (or, perhaps, mostly written, though I'd never admit it in court), by former *CGW* managing editor Dana Jongewaard, who defected from this fair magazine in a rather heinous act of treason a couple of years ago to work with our pals over at *Official PlayStation Magazine*. But see what a game like *Spore* does to people? It gets them crawling back! Dana practically groveled for the opportunity to come back, this one time, to work on the *Spore* story. OK, so maybe it was more like me begging for her to help. Still, the point remains. Or maybe it doesn't.

And what is it with these wandering managing editors, anyway? Is it me? Do I smell? Because, with this issue, we bid a fond farewell to our current managing editor, Kristen Salvatore, whose departure was rather suspiciously well timed with opening day of the baseball season. So if you see Kristen in the bleachers somewhere, yelling nasty things about Barroid, please tell her we're onto her. Truthfully, though, we do know where she went, which was to pursue an excellent opportunity at some rival magazine (I forget the name)—and, though it sucks to say it, we wish her all the best. But, hey, Kris? Any secrets you want to spill, like in a double-agent *Alias* sort of way? You know where to find us.

/ JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion...and more *Oblivion*...
1UP.com Blog: egreen.1UP.com

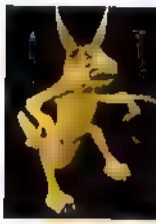
THE ECOLOGY OF CGW



DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

The Scaly Fecafolisaur (Chordata Amphibia Dumbassus) wields an additional limb with fully functional digits. Unexpected side benefits: The ability to simultaneously IM, play *Oblivion*, and flip off Ryan.

Now Playing: Dreamfall
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/COLUMNS)

A solitary creature by nature, the Great Scott subsists on a diet of Cactus Cooler, cheap sandwiches, and *Lost* episodes. This species' advanced metabolism allows it to consume up to six times its own body weight.

Now Playing: Civilization IV
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS/FEATURES)

"Make something ugly," they said. "You can't mess up with *Spore*'s creature creator!" Clickety-click, and somehow Shawn ended up with a gimpy, gooly bog monster. Ugly, no. Menacing, not so much. Messed up, for sure.

Now Playing: Tomb Raider: Legends
1UP.com Blog: egrnshawn.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
FILEFRONT LIAISON

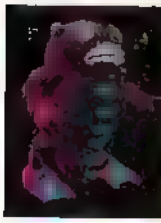
The Loganilicus lurks in the foggy marshlands of Santos Friscus and lives on Marmite sandwiches and kiwifruit. This creature can survive lengthy exposure to sci-fi or horror movies.

Now Playing: The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Tomb Raider: Legends
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Unlike many predators who sneak up on their prey, the Flying Spaghetti Frog has simply developed excellent recipes for pasta. It has been known to devour gallons of spaghetti in seconds and remains a mystery to the science community.

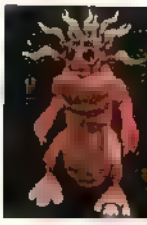
Now Playing: City of Villains
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com



SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

It's a Grimus. It likes purple drinks and caffeine, and it can also be heard at night doing its traditional mating call: GRIMUS GRIMUS GRIMUS...GRIMUS GRIMUS GRIMUS...GRIMUS GRIMUS G-R-I-M-U-S!!!

Now Playing: Prince of Persia
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com



MATT PECKHAM
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

The unfortunate victim of crippling gene drift, FNG-Matt possesses the syntactical skills of an autistic barn swallow. Unladen, of course.

Now Playing: The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Dungeons & Dragons Online
1UP.com Blog: matpeckham.1UP.com

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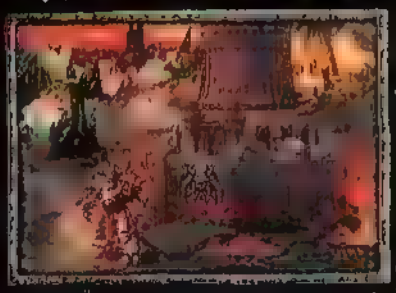
HEROES V
OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

A LEGEND RETURNS. A NEW ERA IN STRATEGY DAWNS.



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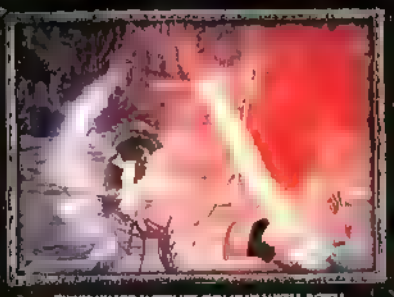

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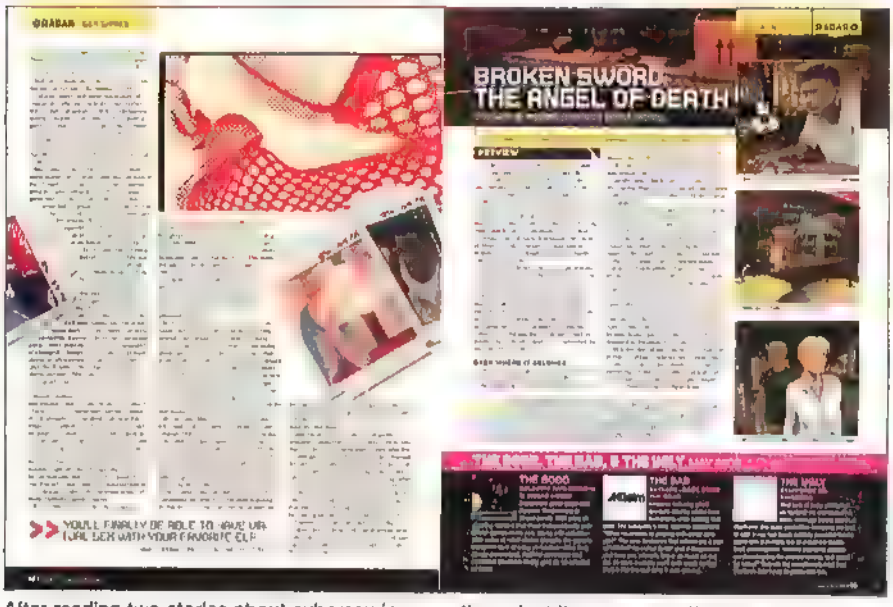
LETTER OF THE MONTH



After reading two stories about cybersex in a row [*CGW* #262, May 2006], how it was going to be "the next big thing," and feeling worse about being a gamer than ever I have before, I couldn't help but laugh out loud when I glanced at page 43. While it's unusual for *CGW* to lay out three vertically aligned pictures, it's even more infrequent to see a male character in each one staring out at the same direction. As I followed their glances, I deduced why they were all gazing so intently to the opposing page: the centered picture of a blonde bending over in a small, white blouse! Now, you can play the innocent, "Oh, ha-ha-ha, how did that happen?" card all you want, but I know what you guys were thinking. You can even tell by the annoyed expression in the bottommost picture on page 43 that she knows where her man is looking. Well done, *CGW*. Well done.

Eli Sheldon

If only we were that clever on purpose, maybe our moms would love us more.

TECH TIP

I like the new Tech section—the LCD monitor feature was really informative and does a good job of educating. You might want to talk about dead and stuck pixels at some point, though. It's sometimes possible to fix them. Lightly massaging the screen on the bad pixel can help, and you can find helpful programs on the web (Google "fix dead pixels" and you'll see a WidowPC page with the program available for free). But it's really important to know that manufacturer's policy on returns for them—generally, industry policy is 16 or more dead or stuck pixels (to qualify) for a return. You can generally purchase dead pixel insurance, however. I think it's worth it, since they appear most often within 90 days of purchase.

Joshua

GUILD GENDER WARS

In regards to April's article on the GLBT-friendly guild, I have to say that I side with Blizzard on this one. Not because I think they should smother GLBT-friendly guilds or otherwise, but because I feel that the public channels are not the place for any personal information to be related. If you need help with a quest, ask on general chat, but don't tell Ironforge that you're going to your girlfriend's house to knock boots. If you need guild members to help raid Molten Core, fire that away on general chat, but don't announce that you need to be straight to join. If you're going to have that kind of policy, make a webpage and require incoming members to read it. Your real-life choices shouldn't affect my gameplay unless I take steps to initiate some kind of in-game relationship. *WOW* should be about the game—not about the player.

Allison

Yeah, well, what do we know? We thought "GLBT" was a sandwich.

TOM VS. BRUCE VS. SIMS FANS

I was annoyed at Bruce's attitude toward *The Sims 2* in your April Tom vs. Bruce column. Not only did he sneer at it by calling it "computer Barbies," but he also didn't even try to play. Most of the World War II strategy games could be called computer G.I. Joe, after all. Surely *CGW* does not wish to claim that boy dolls are somehow better than girl dolls? Or is it that you want to propagate the notion that shooting, killing, and destroying are better than living, building, and creating? You already offer pretty slim pickings for female gamers; try not to alienate us completely, okay?

Cory Kerens, who has saved the world in many, many games, but who also enjoys *The Sims 2*.

NO NOOKIE FOR YOU!

I was shocked when I read Crispin Boyer's review of the TrackIR 4: PRO when he used the words, "It won't get you laid" and "nookie." This type of phrasing does not belong in a premier gaming magazine. Come on, Jeff! Do your job!

Donavan Anderson

Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green responds: "What's 'nookie'?"

THE EVIL WITHIN

Thanks for the article about StarForce [April 2006, *CGW* #261] and the problems it causes. My computer was acting slow and hanging up; after reading your article, I looked through my computer and found that I did have StarForce on it. I removed it from my computer, and things are just fine now.

How did StarForce end up on my machine? I got it when installed *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* FROM YOUR DEMO DISC!!!! Please do us subscribers a big favor. Don't accept any demos that use StarForce. Copy protection for a demo???? WTF???

Gary

Well, since we no longer have a demo disc, it's a moot point. Still, our bad in a big way. We hate StarForce as much as you. And as we went to press, Ubisoft dropped StarForce from all its new games. Yay! >

MAIL BYTES

I like the new Tech section. It has its own feel. GREAT job on the article [*CGW* #262, May 2006]. It was really informative.
—Joshua

SCORCHED EARTH IS NO MORE ?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?! I think a part of me may have just died.
—Gringo

Having a Tech section that tells me to go to the Internet for content is like getting an STD from my inflatable sheep!
—Bummed Out

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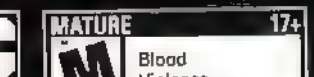

CGW CHANGES: PRO AND CON

***Editor's Note:** Well, it's not like we weren't expecting it. But the mail—both pro and con—keeps pouring in on our recent decision to drop the scores from our game reviews. Here's a small sample—with plenty more to follow, we're sure.*

Are you guys on drugs? Is your CPU overclocked? First, you tell us that you're discontinuing the Game of the Year edition because it's "boring and unnecessary." Now you're telling us that you're going to do reviews without ratings.

Hell, why stop there? Why review the games at all? You could all sit around the office and think happy thoughts. That way, you wouldn't have to write all of those "boring and unnecessary" articles. Why let those readers—who plunk down $8 for the joy of reading all of your witty banter—bring your heads down? As for content, you could pattern *CGW* after all of those women's magazines. You could just print a lot of ads—and maybe some pictures of games.

Do me a favor: Stop changing my favorite magazine. Isn't it bad enough that I have to read green print on a red background?

Brian McGowan

I'm a longtime reader, first-time writer; basically, I just wanted to give you huge kudos on your decision to drop the ratings scale in your April reviews. I hope you stick with this. It's brilliant. Ratings tend to be worthless and exist only as a means for people who don't want to take the time to actually inform themselves about the game to garner some quick thoughts. And, I suppose, as a tool for metasites—even more annoying. Either way, very good choice on getting rid of them, and I hope it sticks.

Philip Kollar

The idea of reviews without scores couldn't suck more. *CGW* without review scores is a magazine I don't need. Keep up the good work.

Steve

I just read the April issue of *CGW*. I have to say, while the whole issue was pretty crappy and the Reviews section seriously sucked. I hate that there were no stars on any of the reviews. Although, I guess that's understandable, as I'd imagine it would probably take a long time to rate seven whole reviews. Good thing there were lots of irrelevant, boring articles to make the magazine seem really long. I mean, what could be better than an article about card games and a boring interview with Ralph Koster and a boring article about machinima and another boring interview with Jeff Butler and then another boring interview with Jon Van Caneghem? I guess if we can't read computer-game reviews, we may as well read about you guys talking to people who make computer games. That's just as good!

On second thought—no, it isn't. How about you guys get back to reviewing computer games and stop with all the boring s****?

Erik

Outstanding! It's about time magazines dropped the numerical review system. Please keep it up. It's ludicrous to think that a single digit can sum up a two-page review. I can't count the number of times I've read in a review the score was lowered due to the lack of some feature that I don't care about or lowered due to some bugs that will be patched by the time I read the review. If I'd only looked at the score, I might have missed out on some great games. We're all different. Depending on the person, some game features are more important than others, and some genres are more interesting than others. A single numerical score can't reflect how a game will appeal to everyone—so it's best to do away with it altogether and make people read the reviews. You're writers. How do you feel about your 500-word review being summed up by a single number?

Eddie Goletz

What the hell? No ratings on games? Isn't that why you're in business?

Nik Smith

I buy your magazine and *PC Gamer* for one thing: the reviews. I don't read the previews or the features. I don't have a lot of spare time in my life, so review scores allow me to skip the trash and read only the reviews of good games, which then allows me to further whittle down the small number of games I have time to play.

Please refund my April issue, as it's worthless to me without review scores. If you plan to continue this in the future, cancel and refund the balance of my subscription.

Rex Jacobsen

I'm glad you got rid of numerical game scores. They were handy, but what always seemed to happen is that fanboys would get all pissy and bitch about *Halo 2* getting a 92 and *Half-Life 2* getting a 93 for months and months. Thank you for allowing them to shut up and forcing gamers to use their brains. Please keep the numbers away from the reviews, as you are reviewing art, not degrees of precision.

Mike

I need reviews that tell me quickly about a game with stars or numbers or letters, anything that rates them. At my age, I don't have the time to read about videogames. I just want to know what is good so that I can relax for a few hours.

FredS99

I just want to say that the idea that there should be no reviews on a game is total BS. Hopefully, you guys don't choose to stay that way, because your 1-5 star verdicts are, at times, all I look at with games, and most of the time I can't even tell how good the game really is without a starred verdict. PLEASE KEEP THE OLD REVIEWING SYSTEM. I think I and many other gamers will be glad.

yogi k.

I've waited years for you to return to the starless reviews of old. Thank you.

Samuel Erikson

I want to write in absolute support of removing any sort of numerical equivalent to rating (stars, percentages, etc.) games. Now all you guys need to do is remove the summary box entirely. There shouldn't be any quotes at all to be abused by publishers and advertisers in any reviews. Plus, it reclaims more space to talk about the game, which is the original intent of a review. Anyone who laments the loss of some sort of grading rubric should stop reading reviews and pick out their games entirely based on ads; they can get fancy numbers and quotes, and it won't take them more than a minute to actually bother to comprehend why anyone would write those words in the first place.

I look to *CGW* as the elder statesman of videogame journalism: professional, credible, and experienced enough to separate the trash from the treasures. Hopefully, every other publication will follow your lead and throw away this infantile gesture to try and copy movies. In my [local] newspaper, fine art, books, opera, ballet, plays, classical concerts, and so on never get any sort of rating. One must actually read the review to see how the reviewer perceived it. Kudos to you guys for further legitimizing the argument that games can be art—possibly equal to even the fine arts.

Robert Danziger

Fool with your own money, not mine. Do what I pay you to do. Star rate the games!

Steven C. Montrose

Just wanted to offer positive feedback on your decision to do away with rankings in your reviews. I think it's a good idea, as long as you deliver on doing more in-depth reviews of the games themselves. I like that you are thinking about ways to keep your magazine relevant in today's world of the Internet. I also like the podcast you've started offering. It's a good way to reach readers about different subjects that you can't do in the same way in the magazine. Keep up the good work.

Jason Becker

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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ISSUE 263

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PLAY WITH ME

Keyboard and mouse no more?

CULTURE

IT'S NO COINCIDENCE THAT FINGER-propelled interchanges govern our day-to-day existence, click by clack—they have for centuries. Bach could jam for hours at a keyboard, improvising fugues and chorales, plucking metal strings with springy key levers and jacks. And the typewriter as QWERTY-character touchstone has been with us since Sholes & Glidden pegged its jam-resistant letters into a keymap circa 1874. From IBM's original 83-key PC/XT to today's 107-key enhanced models and *World of WarCraft* Zboard, forget your age: Your hours and minutes can almost be yardsticked in keystrokes.

That's going to change sooner or later, depending on which futurist you subscribe to (technophile author Ray Kurzweil thinks we'll be nerve-jacking Neos by 2030). In the meantime, I'm typing this article on beveled buttons. Occasionally, my right hand glides to the mouse to pointer-whip windows on a smooth, glowing screen. Stickies and icons and twitching taskbar buttons, streaming video and ripping audio and *Battlefield 2* in a window: We're like miniature meshwork conductors with binary orchestras. But we've been plying the same ergonomic batons for ages. Are we just hardwired?

"It's not about when we'll switch from keyboard-mouse to something new; it's whether we'd want to," says 17-year industry interface vet and Logitech's director of strategic marketing Fred Swan. "As soon as you ask the question of when, you have to ask why, and then you're on to looking at new enabling technologies. Voice recognition is getting better. Gesture recognition has come to the fore. But that still doesn't answer why—it just points to how it might be done." And "might" plays right, left, and center when it comes to predictions about future HIDs (human interface devices). "Why" has as much to do with what you want as with what you need. Says Swan: "The only answer to, 'Why a paradigm shift?' would be, essentially, because there has to be one."

HOI POLLOI SKUNK WORKS

Keyboards work type-to-text wonders but curl some wrists into carpal-tunnel claws. Joysticks crowd already cluttered desktops, and gamepads sit dislocated and option-limiting in your lap. Mice skitter in two-dimensional straitjackets, and have you ever scraped that alien fusty-fungus off their bottoms? Wouldn't it be great if someone just gave us that cool finger-flicking thingamabob Tom Cruise had in *Minority Report*? "We get inquiries about this kind of thing all the time," says Swan. "I think it's people's wish for variety or for something new, rather than practicality. I get questions from people like, 'When is somebody going to replace the mouse for FPS?' and the answer I give is, well, people have. Frequently. For the last 10 years. And none of those devices gained any traction."

Fair enough—we know what happens when developers push out-of-touch ideas, but random mutation (as simple as mouse wheels) can pay dividends as well. The first thing you need is a gauge for evaluating the question of what makes a good interface. "When I consider which devices are going to work or appeal to somebody, I break it down to what I call the three F's," says Swan. "Fast, familiar, functional. Is it the fastest way to do something? Is it familiar, or are they going to have to relearn what they've been doing for the last five or 20 years? And is it functional; does it get the job done? If the answer to all three is yes, you have a winner."

So how do you test? *Game Interface Design* (2004) author and Wahoo Studios art director Brent Fox thinks focus groups are bad for probing interface ideas but great for scoping current solutions in action. "If you ask a gamer how to solve a problem, you might not get the best answer," explains Fox. "But if you ask them whether your solution 'works,' you can get very valuable information. We rarely ask players which features they'd want to see in their ultimate game. Don't ask a player what he wants—ask him if a new idea works."

Swan agrees. "We're most influenced by what we see when, for example, we watch people use mice to play games. What is it that we see bothering them? How might they improve their performance by doing something differently? Do they need more buttons? Does the mouse need to be lighter or heavier? More precise? So not necessarily specific feedback from people, but as Yogi Berra would say, 'You can observe a lot just by watching.'"

SENSE AND SENSITIVITY

Ask gamers to rate simulations, and they'll often grouse: not realistic enough. But are they really? "When someone switches to a game environment, for some reason everything they know about interacting in that environment with the device they'd use in real life goes out the window," says Swan. "Take someone who doesn't normally play games and put them in front of *Gran Turismo 4* on a PS2 with the best steering wheel in the world, and they're going to be all over the road." Swan is referring to cognitive problems when visual environments shift, from being in a real car to sitting stock-still in front of a screen. Think the steering control's wonky? It might just be you.

"There are real, live professional race drivers at the top of their game who will not only go out and test drive on the track with their cars before a race, but prepare for the race by sitting down with a game like *GT4*," notes Swan. "It's just that accurate." In other words, the practically autonomic fine motor movements you make in your car or just walking around don't (yet) translate well to existing interfaces. "We have to be very careful with that familiarity aspect," Swan adds. "We need to make sure that the benefit of the product is sufficiently great that people will want to invest the learn time."

And it's all about time. Games change at breakneck pace. Keyboards as typewriters still sustain our basic text-typing needs, but *Pong* is not *Populous*, and Sony's EyeToy is no Tai-Bo workout video. What about spatial shifts from 2D to 3D? While we've added buttons and analog thumbsticks, today's controllers still look and function pretty much like yesteryear's NES pads. At a 2004 DICE Summit demonstration of Lionhead Studios' *Fable*, design prophet Peter Molyneux suggested that indeed, controllers are just 3D-hybridized 2D holdovers badly in need of a second-gen shake up.

But while 3D has yet to meet its ideal go-between, beware false prophets. "When you look at *Minority Report*, that type of interface is both charming and very dramatic," says Swan. "It's dramatic because there's motion, because it's new, and because whether or not Tom Cruise has the most expressive of faces, he knows how to make broad, crisp motions with his body that are compelling to the audience." Gesture-based interfaces fundamentally change the underlying game, be they designed for or slipstreamed. "In a videogame, you want to be able to do things

OPTIC KEYS

With their eyes on ergonomics for packed planes or travel tables, some companies are pushing "projection" keyboards: a small box set in front of you beams a keyboard image onto a flat surface. You type; it captures your finger-tap optically—no moving parts. Now imagine the ability to resize or distill key-map layouts in games on the fly. Keys too small or cluttered? Scale them up or nix superfluous sword-lock buttons. "These sorts of things may have an application," says Swan, "because it's not completely changing what people do; it's just allowing apps to be more efficient or flexible within the same realm of behavior."

> "WHEN IS SOMEBODY GOING TO REPLACE THE MOUSE FOR FPS?" THE ANSWER I GIVE IS, WELL, PEOPLE HAVE."
>
> —FRED SWAN, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC MARKETING, LOGITECH

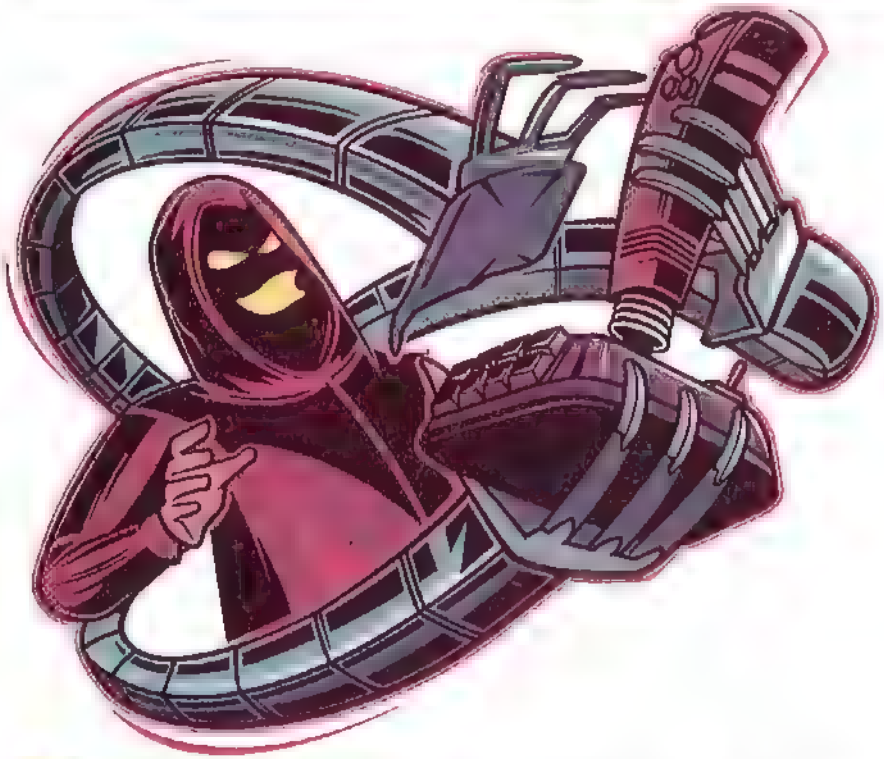
HANDS-ON HAPTICS

Avant-garde designer SensAble Technologies makes a curious looking haptic ("of or relating to the sense of touch") device called the SensAble Phantom Omni that's been successful (if costly, at over $800) in vertical industries like medicine and CAD. "Our device sits on your desk and you hold it exactly like a pen," explains SensAble president and chief operating officer Bob Steingart. "You can gesture fully in 3D space, so imagine XYZ, pitch-yaw-roll, and force feedback, all in an area roughly the size of a bread box." With the Phantom, you actually move an arm-attached "pen" through the air, colliding with objects and receiving different types of tactile feedback as you bump into things. It's true bidirectional closed-loop interaction.

So the Phantom has demonstrated its use in specialized fields, but how does that translate to the broader realm of gaming? "We've spoken to the large game companies, and their reaction is, 'If you can't sell a million—not interested,'" says SensAble's Steingart. "So we came up with OpenHaptics, which is a toolkit sold with our device to make it easier for game developers to experiment." Case in point: Imagine melding America's two favorite pastimes, capping friends and playing *Pong*. Sound silly? Says Steingart: "Keep in mind that combining guns and skiing sounds even more ridiculous, but that's an Olympic sport." Presented at GDC 2004, *Haptic Battle Pong* lets you use the Phantom's full six degrees of freedom to paddle opponents or gun them down. With rockets. (And Rockstar thinks its upcoming Xbox 360 *Table Tennis* game is cool...)

Grab it like a pen, pitch-yaw-roll it like a baton, feel the force feedback.... SensAble's haptic tools give you six degrees of closed-loop feedback.

Walk the Phantom one step sideways, however, and you get something curiously similar to Nintendo's upcoming and much-ballyhooed Revolution controller (if it shared more in common with its stylus-based handheld cousin, that is). *Haptic Quake*—presently in the exploratory stage—allows you to orient the stylus to direct the gaze of your character in free space, paralleling camera-pointing in a virtual world. But while Nintendo's controller uses gyroscopic tilt/motion sensors to feedback-loop input, the Phantom also provides a range of tactile recoil effects specific to each weapon, such as rapid-fire machine gun impulses or a shotgun's boom-back jolt. Phantom versus Revolution? Costs aside, conceivably both...or neither. It all depends on whether the designers and applications can make the interfaces compelling. We play games, not gadgets, after all.



> FRUSTRATION BUILDS WHEN "GOTTA HAVE" CLASHES WITH GARDEN VARIETY.

your character can't in real life, whether that's racing cars at 150 mph or running for hours toting a 100-pound rail gun."

Molyneux agrees. "The only thing...about the EyeToy is...it's bloody exhausting to play games," he mused at 2004's DICE Summit. "I have to have energy drinks after about five minutes. And the thought of actually playing a 20-hour gaming experience—you'd be like an international bodybuilder at the end of it."

MARKET TO MARKET

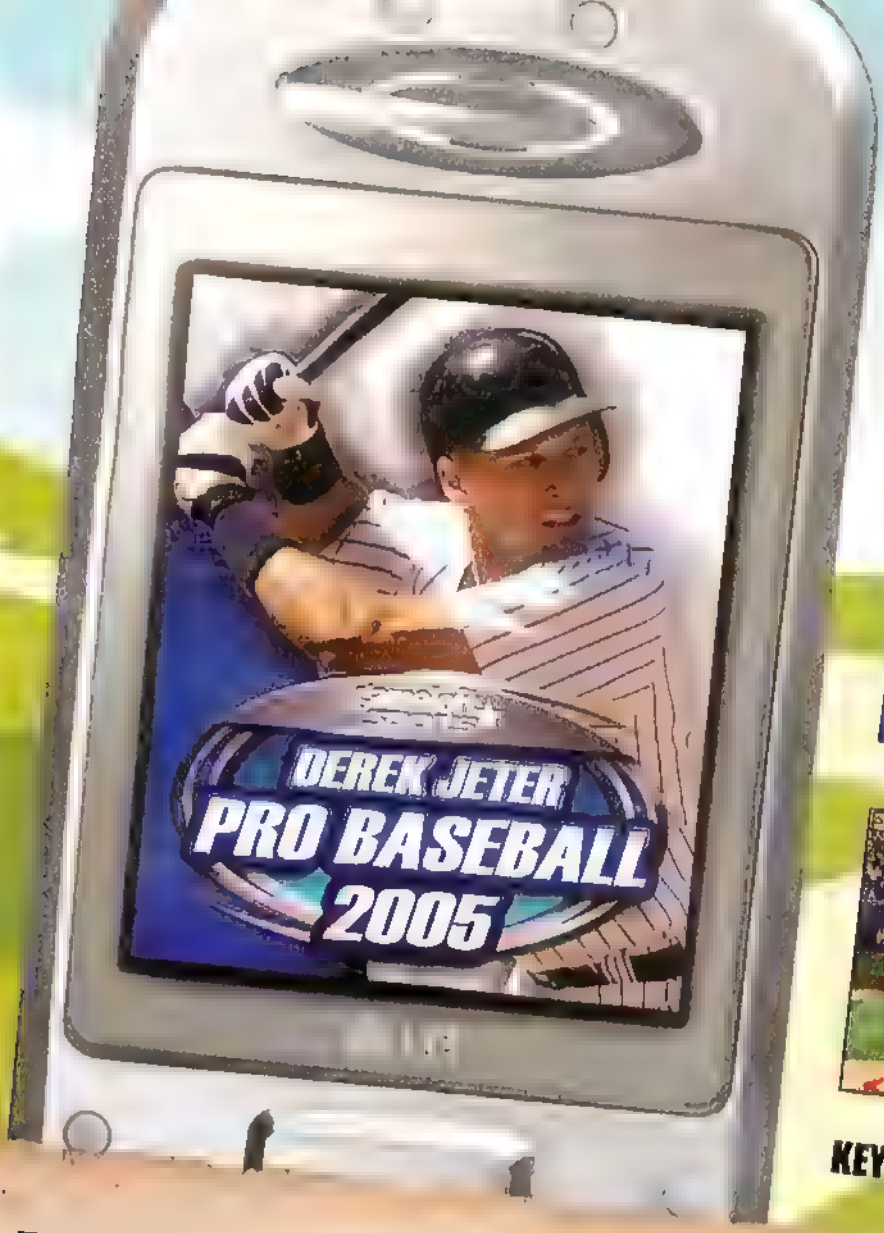
Solutions are born of frustration and frustration builds when "gotta have" clashes with garden variety. "When you look at circumstances where the existing solutions are inadequate for a specific and clear reason and where they no longer meet people's needs," says Swan, "then you're going to get new devices and new ways of doing things." Two-pound cell phone "bricks" in 1984 versus *Star Trek* flip-ups today, for example.

And function certainly governs form, as the bric-a-brac history of game interfaces illustrates. Take the early 1990s Logitech Cyberman, which resembled a mouse impaled on a joystick and worked with games like id's *Doom* and Bethesda's (yeah, that Bethesda) *Terminator: Rampage*. It had six degrees of freedom: XYZ, pitch-yaw-roll, and vibrotactile feedback on batteries or AC power. "The Cyberman was similar to the PSP's pointing device," explains Swan, "a disc that moves within a fixed area of space, absolute as opposed to relative, which made it ideal for gaming. People didn't feel it offered enough benefit over the mouse, and it required learning-plus, so they didn't adopt it. And gamers preferred to use the cursor keys on the keyboard or a joystick. There wasn't enough excitement from the game developers to make it a success."

Getting hip hardware to market and dev supported is most of the problem. At 2004's DICE Summit, Molyneux said: "I'm sure there are going to be lots of interesting revolutions. The big problem is [getting game designers to start] supporting [them]. It's going to require a fairly major effort from hardware manufacturers."

Or maybe not. Sony's EyeToy simply pinned an application to hardware at the market-standard $50 price point. "Sony eliminated any decision making by bundling," adds Swan. "And once people have the camera from the first-generation games, you're selling second gen at full margin in a market you own." Slipstream hardware through your install base? Sounds like the model to follow, frankly, so what are we waiting for? Bring on the Vista-bundled retina jacks already.

Matt Peckham



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PREVIEW

"WE'RE AT A POINT WHERE YOU can only do so much with typical modern combat and World War II scenarios," *Nuclear Dawn* project manager David Lyon insists. "We see plenty of games in these genres, but other than prettier graphics and greater immersion, we aren't adding much to them." Not that *Nuclear Dawn*'s postapocalypse, where East and West wage morning-after war, [illegible] videogames' [illegible] of place [illegible] games. Instead, it's [illegible] to forge [illegible] that liberates (although *WD* does [illegible] sci-fi with gusto).

[illegible] *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, *Insecticide*, *Savage 2*, *Tactics of War*—the list of would-be genre-benders goes on and on, professional and nonprofit alike. The hybrid du jour and *Dawn*'s brand of bilingualism: RTS/FPS. "It's probably a natural progression," says Lyon. "Publishers want to sign up safe bets, so they take cues from successful titles with similar concepts. *Battlefield* and *Halo* opened doors for developers wanting to make FPSes with vehicles and vast landscapes, and RTS/FPS gameplay is a pretty natural progression from that. The appeal, of course, is that you're playing something like *Command & Conquer*, but the little guys getting the Tesla-coil treatment are actual players."

The business is beyond tricky. How, for instance, to gainfully employ omniscient commanders without overempowering them? How complex can you make a multiplayer mod without minimizing your audience? According to Lyon, "It's more a matter [illegible]

EXO
Heavily armed and armored, exos move like [illegible]

INFANTRY
Jacks-of-all-trades infantry have access to armor and the widest array of weaponry.

STEALTH
Swift and savage at close quarters, stealth troopers have a harder time with nonclaked combat.

knowing where you should and shouldn't add complexity. Simply dumbing down the whole experience is only going to make your game seem shallow, which can be just as damaging as if it were overly complex. We're working to make *Nuclear Dawn* as accessible to players as possible, and then adding anything else as optional elements that people can choose to involve themselves in at their own pace. In other words, newbies need only worry about WASD and fire, [so they] can still contribute to the team."

To torpedo the opposition's spawn chambers and sponge up any remaining resistance in *Dawn*'s RTS-inspired mode, a team must claim all-important resource points. Once under control, these capture zones—cum-war-chests generate loot. (This loot is then split between commander and soldiers, where the former buys buildings and the latter get guns and armor, Lyon says. "Plus, a commander can drop resource drills to increase the rate of extraction and prevent the opposing team from jumping his claim until the drill is destroyed.")

Assisting subordinates, a commander weaves support structures in an interconnected web. He places static defenses and supply depots at the front while guarding the generators that power them," Lyon continues. "Positioning and maintaining structures on the battlefield is critical to the success of an attack." (See Base Anatomy sidebar.) Conversely, a chief can agro and nullify the enemy's fortifications with electronics-scrambling EMP strikes, and—pinpointing power generators or spawn points—he can instruct his men to infiltrate and trash critical structures.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30

BASE ANATOMY

Commanders drop over a dozen RTS-style structures onto the battlefield for soldiers to build.

ARMORY

Stop-and-shop armories allow players to convert stockpiled resources into arm-sets and a variety of class-specific arms. Think *Counter-Strike*'s shopping cart available when and where you want it mid-stroke.

SPAWN CHAMBER

Situated at main bases, spawn chambers bring players into being. In a pinch, a commander can pay a resource penalty to overcharge a chamber, rapidly and simultaneously respawning multiple soldiers.

POWER REACTOR

All-important power reactors provide juice to other machinery on the map. Send one contingent to scrap the other side's reactor and order another to plow through as its turrets power down.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

MEET THE MAKERS

What are employed professionals, already plugging away at blockbusters with massive marketing muscle and actual budgets, doing working nights on mod mash-up *Nuclear Dawn*? Pissed-off, less-senior programmers out to vindicate passed-off ideas? Nothing of the sort, although artist Andrew Hamilton—whose day job is with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* developer Splash Damage—isn't ruling out "pretext to potter in a competitor's engine" as part of his answer. "Professional organization," "pure talent," and "retail-quality work," he says, are what whipped up his interest. "A number of the project's members are already in the industry, with others well on their way," Hamilton says. "And, [component creation] is [a way] adapt this know-how to all aspects of production." Again—where money isn't involved—we ask, well, why?

Moonlighting animator Dan Lowe, also of Bizarre Creations (*Project Gotham Racing* and *Geometry Wars*), notes: "Modmakers always seem to say, 'We can take risks that developers won't,' and yet, so many mods are as derivative as regular retail games...although, in the majority of cases, they need to be to have mass appeal. For me, the benefit of working on mods over professional projects is that I have more freedom to pick and choose what I want to work on at the content level. Where professional development is rigid in this respect, as a modder I can say, 'I have this great idea for a map,' and then go ahead and make it. Or, I can say, 'I don't feel like modeling today; I think I'll try some animation.' Plus, it's nice working in a small team where I have much more influence on the direction of the project as a whole." Perhaps input and ideas are part of the motivation after all.

Somehow helming this staff—a minor Who's Who, which includes Paul Kamma, creator of *Codename: Gordon*; Jason Hazelroth, concept artist at developer Pandemic; Philip Klevestav, who's working on *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* for PC; in addition to folks attached to AAA titles who've asked to remain anonymous due to contractual complications—is 21-year-old David Lyon. "I get across what I want to do and demonstrate that I have the determination to do it," the project manager says. "I don't think any of them worry about taking orders from someone who, in some cases, is almost half their age. Motivating the staff is essential, especially with a mod, where help might be here today, gone tomorrow."

/ Shawn Elliott

Not shown: *Dawn*'s tech tree endows first-rate commanders with turret upgrades, choice weapons, and tools to scan entire swaths of enemy-dominated terrain. ▶

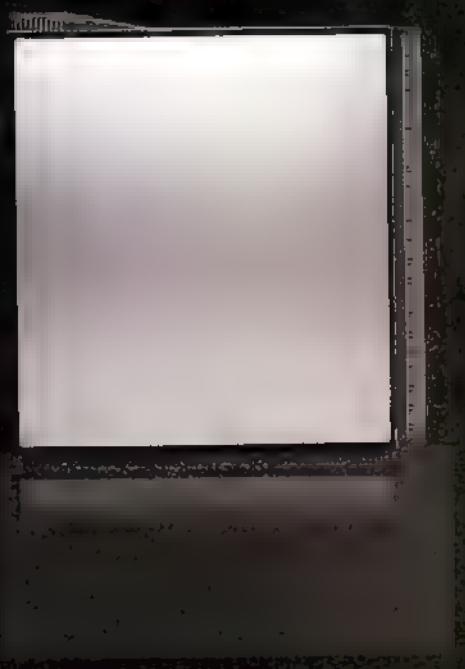
Vatan Ansari *Nuclear Dawn* [illegible] *Jin-Roh*'s near-[illegible] *Killzone* comes into play, too. ▶

"RTS/FPS combos are challenging," Lyon says, "in that almost all players play from first-person perspective, whereas only one person on each side sits in the commander's chair." ▶

Commanders can cocreate teleport points or transport gates almost anywhere on the map. Force your way through the front—setting up gates as you go—or order a stealth trooper to build one behind lines. ▶

"NEWBIES NEED ONLY WORRY ABOUT WASD AND FIRE"

–DAVID LYON, PROJECT MANAGER



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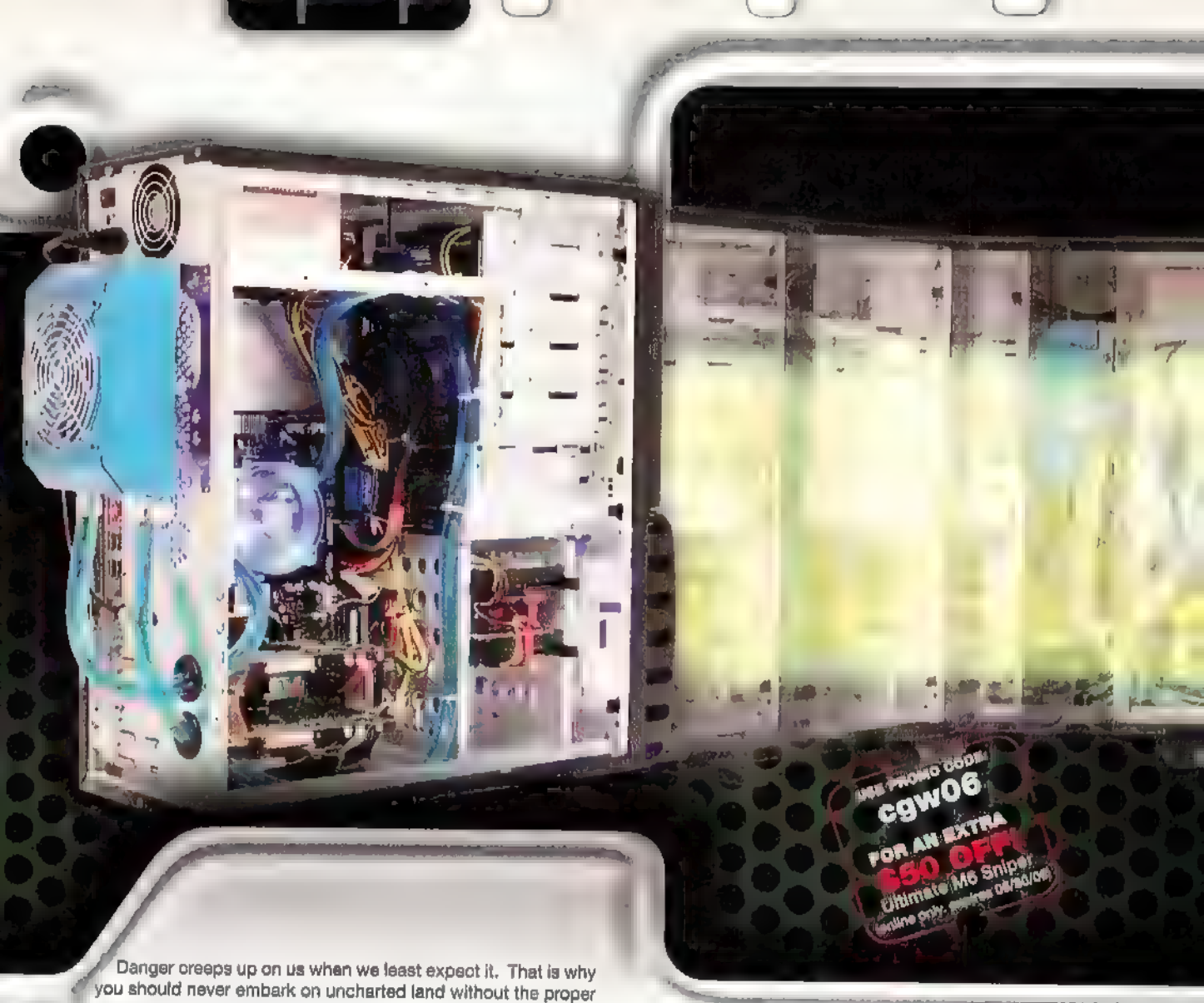

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COLUMN

FREELOADER

Scoring free games without that icky "pirate" aftertaste

The Sundance Film Festival finds a leathery Robert Redford and hordes of "beautiful people" Hollywood types flooding into Park City, UT to pat themselves on the back for their extreme avant-garde-ness. What does the game industry get? A bunch of ambitious coders (some still in school), waiting for their shots at the big time. The Independent Games Festival, held every year during the Game Developers Conference, reminds me of why I love this business. Students, full-time game designers, and people with nothing more than a dream crawl out of the woodwork to show off some truly clever stuff. Somehow, they even manage to make great little games without multimillion-dollar budgets.

A few months back, in these very pages, *CGW* picked a bunch of great freebies for you to try. Turns out a number of them went on to become winners in this year's IGF competition. The beat-em-up *Dad 'n Me*, the free-ish MMO *Dofus*, and the cubist fighting game *Rumble Box*, to name a few (go to 101freegames.1UP.com to find out more about them). To kick off our regular coverage of free games in this space, though, we couldn't think of a better way than to highlight some of the other titles on display this year. While not everyone walks away with a prize from the annual awards, we're all winners. I mean, look at all the free games I get to play now! /The Freeloader

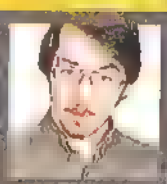
I love zombies. Why, just the thought of the shambling undead in lacy lingerie...er, sorry. *Stubbs the Zombie* gave me a gurgle of hope, but I wanted more. Apparently, so did a team of students from the Art Institute of Vancouver. While only in beta, *The Awakening* already shows lots of promise. This multiplayer survival-horror game stars four different characters, each with special abilities, and each fighting to escape the zombie apocalypse. They can work together and survive the hordes—or, if bitten, slowly become zombies and turn on their friends. George Romero would be proud. Maybe that's because the entire game is shot through a film-grain filter. It's still early, and a lot of the team might be graduating—but, someone, please help get this game finished. I want to play it!

Here's proof that a game doesn't need blood, bullets, or even enemies to equal fun. *Cloud*, developed by students from the University of Southern California's Interactive Media Division, puts you into something of a Zen state. On the occasional lazy Saturday, I'll look up at the sky and make pictures in the clouds. That's the point of this open-ended game: A sick child gets his wish to soar through the sky and befriend clouds. In this dreamy setting, you gather and shape them however you please. Ah, but into every game, a little rain must fall. You also need to coax rain out from stratus clouds to feed the land below and put out fires. With no time limit rushing you through, you can just chill out a little and enjoy a little downtime.

My favorite part of the *Battlefield* series: the vehicles. Rolling around in team-based combat and blowing enemies to hell is great fun. Now, take that and drop it into a bleak *Mad Max*-like world. Sounding pretty damn sweet, eh? It gets better in *Goliath*, where you take control of one of 16 human- or A.I.-controlled vehicles to help rebuild factories. The real goal: taking down an absurdly larger-than-life titanic tank. Hop behind the wheel of agile dune buggies, armored cars bristling with firearms, and more. Rev up the single- or multiplayer modes. Thank me later.

ONLINE!
When it comes to free games, you only need to remember one website: freeloader.1UP.com, my online home away from home. Check back for new finds every month.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY JUNE 2006



THE GOOD

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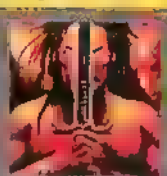


The Bad

[illegible]

THE UGLY

[illegible]

TO CONQUER THE MONSTERS OF LEGEND...

...YOU MUST BECOME A LEGEND YOURSELF.

"Titan Quest has everything you'd expect out of a triple-A PC game."
– Game Informer

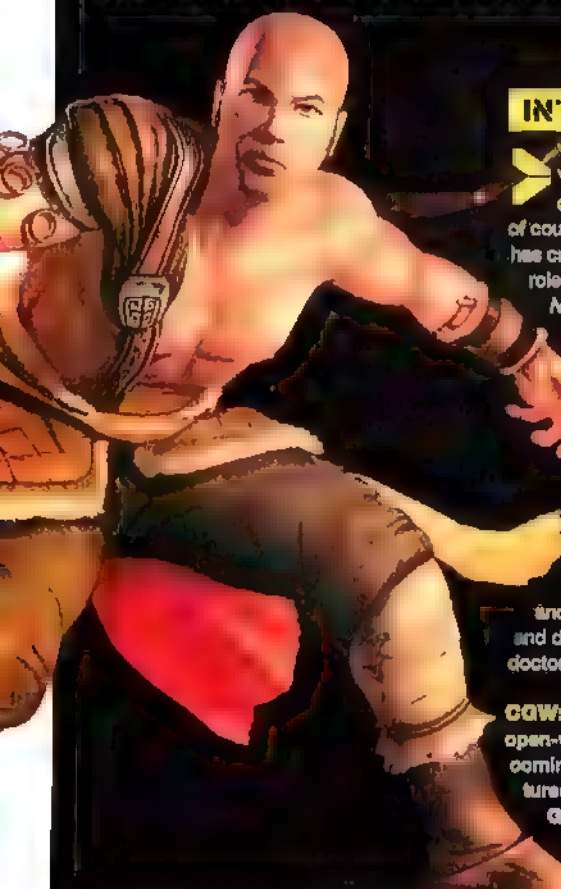
"One of the more promising action/RPG games of 2006."
– IGN

"Who better to defeat the great *Diablo* than the Titans of myth?"
– PC Gamer


Quest through authentic Ancient World settings.
Battle terrifying monsters and mythical beasts.
Build your characters from 28 classes.
JUNE 2006
TITAN QUEST
EMPIRES CO-CREATOR BRIAN SULLIVAN AND BRAVEHEART WRITER RANDALL WALLACE
AN INNOVATIVE, ALL-NEW ACTION RPG SET IN ANCIENT GREECE, EGYPT AND ASIA.
The Titans have escaped their eternal prison, wreaking havoc upon the earth. The gods seek a hero who can turn the tide in an epic struggle that will determine the fate of both men and gods. Unlock arcane mysteries and battle the beasts of mythology as you journey to the Parthenon, the maze at Knossos, the Great Pyramids, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and other legendary locales.

THE CGW INTERVIEW: GREG ZESCHUK AND RAY MUZYKA

The Rx for RPGs BY DARREN GLADSTONE



INTERVIEW//

YOU'RE SMART. YOU STUDY HARD. You go to medical school. What do you do next? Start a videogame company, of course. Since its founding in 1995, BioWare has created some of the most memorable PC role-playing games ever—*Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, to name a few. More recently, BioWare and Pandemic Studios joined corporate forces to become an Ubersdeveloper. What are they up to next? We recently caught up with two men who, arguably, have the longest titles on the planet: Dr. Greg Zeschuk (cofounder and president, BioWare Corp., and corporate VP and director, BioWare/Pandemic Studios) and Dr. Ray Muzyka (cofounder and CEO, BioWare Corp., and corporate VP and director, BioWare/Pandemic Studios). The doctors will see you now.

CGW: What do you think of some of the more open-world, sandbox-style games that are coming out now, as opposed to highly structured role-playing games?

Greg Zeschuk: We always focus on developing compelling and memorable stories and characters in our games, but we certainly appreciate some of the other approaches people take to building their games. We're big fans of both *Gothic II* and *Oblivion*—there's no question they are both great experiences and really fun! We both played *Gothic II* and really enjoyed it, and we're looking forward to *Gothic 3*. And we're both avidly playing *Oblivion* right now!

We believe there's a powerful balance to be struck between making a game with a lot of freedom and a strong story; our best example of doing this is probably *Baldur's Gate II*, and it's a reason why we have uncharted worlds in *Mass Effect* that the player can explore at his or her leisure. We're really excited about the merger of emergence with a strong central story and compelling, realistic characters—that's our focus as a studio.

CGW: Part of that merger of elements is also making games easy to pick up and play. After all, KOTOR is a deep RPG but doesn't feel like one on the surface.

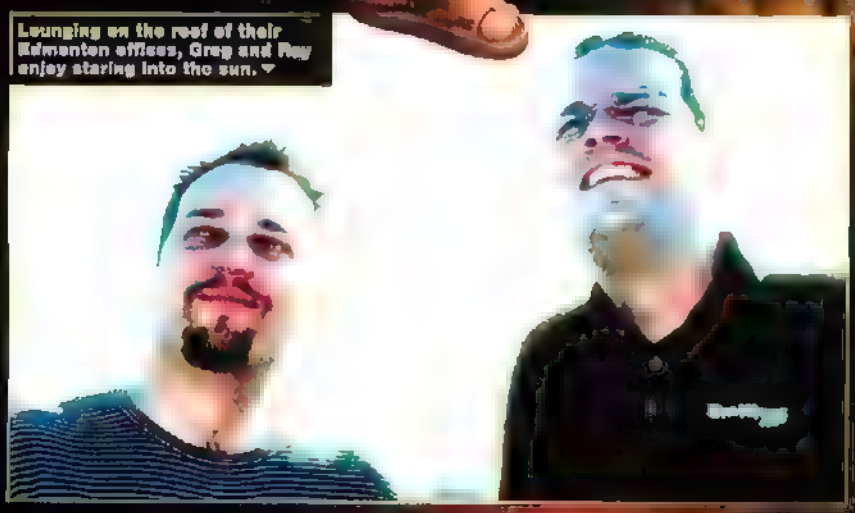
GZ: We're always striving to balance a detailed game system and an approachable interface—as you note, it's the essence of what we do, as we continue to build games that a lot of people will enjoy but that serious players will find deep and rewarding.

It seems like the industry is maturing to the point where most games are adding RPG-like features in order to increase the depth in their games; we're simultaneously experimenting with creating games that combine different genres with RPGs. From our perspective, both as developers and as fans, it's all good!

CGW: Your last few games have had this "karma system" tracking your in-game choices. Is this an overarching philosophy? Something you want to try and bring to all your games?

Ray Muzyka: We're always exploring new things to add to our games. We did really enjoy working with the light and dark concepts in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and the "open palm" and "closed fist" in *Jade Empire*. We don't think that tracking players' actions and having the game respond in some way absolutely needs to be in all RPGs or story-driven games, but it certainly does help us

Lounging on the roof of their Edmonton offices, Greg and Ray enjoy staring into the sun. ▼



THROUGH THE YEARS

1998: The original *Baldur's Gate* comes out to acclaim from critics—except for old *CGW* pundit Scorpia.

2000: *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* ships and continues to garner rave reviews. Scorpia remains unimpressed.

2002: *Neverwinter Nights* arrives and brings the *Dungeons & Dragons* DM/module experience to the PC.

2003: Xbox gamers get their hands on *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* first! We have to wait. Dammit!

2005: BioWare announces in November that it will merge with Pandemic Studios.

2006: This past March, BioWare reveals news of a new Austin, TX studio developing an MMORPG.

focus what we build by requiring different paths through our games. It's also really interesting to see what people do when faced with difficult moral decisions! We have some very compelling examples of deep, moral choices having both short-term and long-term impact in *Mass Effect*, in a way that is beyond anything we've yet seen in any RPG. The characters in *Mass Effect* make it all possible—they're some of the most realistic "virtual actors" in an RPG yet.

CGW: Now for the really obnoxious questions: Your last few games have been console first, PC second. You aren't forgetting about us, are you? And will we ever get to play *Mass Effect* or *Jade Empire*?
GZ: Of course we aren't forgetting our roots! We're still huge fans of the PC here, and believe that some games are really best suited to PC. We'll have more to discuss on that in [illegible]

Will *Jade Empire* ever make it to the PC? [illegible]

CGW: That means you'll tell us more about *Dragon Age* since you first showed it two years ago?
GZ: We continue to work on *Dragon Age* and have a team of really experienced folks carefully crafting the game—the team includes a number of people from the *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* teams. This year, we're focusing all of our PR attention on *Mass Effect*. Watch for more information on *Dragon Age* a little later. It's a very important title to BioWare.

CGW: Where do you think MMOs stand in regards to the future of RPGs?
GZ: We like playing MMOs quite a bit, but it seems they tend to take up a fair amount of time! As a player, it's important to feel that the time you're putting in is worthwhile. We've got a few ideas on how to build up this perceived "value" of the time being spent on the game, but we're keeping them secret for now. More on that later when we reveal more about the MMO developing at BioWare Austin!

CGW: OK, word association time: D20. Go!
GZ: Green Ronin! To me, they epitomize what can be done with the d20 pen-and-paper system.
RM: Magic Missile! (Oops, guess that's actually a d4...)

CGW: How soon before you start sharing technologies on projects with your new business partners?
GZ: We're already talking extensively with the folks at Pandemic at all levels. Ray and I are on the phone or in a video conference with [Pandemic Studios' Andrew Goldman and Josh Resnick] at least a couple of times a week, and BioWare's and Pandemic's employees are frequently chatting as well. We also held our own mini-GDC after the conference in San Jose to discuss approaches to development at both of the companies, with about 50 staff from each studio joining in.

CGW: How will the new superdeveloper work with publishers in the future? Does this give you more leverage to create what you want?
RM: The investment of working capital gives us the resources to be better partners with our publishers; we can take a concept closer to [illegible] not only from a development perspective but also in terms of the marketing focus of the game. The advantage to publishers is that this will reduce their risk—when we [illegible] our publishing partners, they should have a very clear idea of what we're planning to build and can make an informed, lower-risk decision to pursue it.

CGW: Now you're cofounders of a larger company. What are some of the benefits of merging with Pandemic?
RM: We're both corporate VPs and directors of BioWare/Pandemic, and we continue to jointly run BioWare, with me as CEO and Greg as president. We do have a boss for the first time in our lives, though: John Riccitiello is the CEO of BioWare/Pandemic, our parent company, and he's an awesome person to work with—he's been a tremendous mentor to both of us, and we're only getting started! We're both really looking forward to working more with him and all the other great folks at BioWare/Pandemic.
In addition to the investment of working capital to help us to independently fund our operations, we get the chance to work with Pandemic, a very talented group for which we've got a tremendous amount of respect. The collective goals of both BioWare and Pandemic, going forward, are quite similar to our historical goals: We're going to continue to make great products that sell exceptionally well, always strive to be the best place for our team-oriented talent, continually work on maintaining close relationships with our fans, build our respective brands, and always work on being a good partner for our publishing partners.

CGW: Should we expect *Full Spectrum Baldur* in 2007?
RM: After much deliberation, we and Pandemic elected not to work on *Full Spectrum Baldur* (at least for now) and instead decided we would dedicate our development efforts to jointly building *Jaded Aged Mercs Destroying All Mass Empires*™®©, release date pending once we figure out exactly what that means....
CGW: You heard it here first, folks!

MORE AT CGW.1UP.COM

You can't hope to contain the good doctors to a mere two pages. They had much more to say about *Neverwinter Nights* and even how to fight the common cold. How can you not want to go online and read more about them?

"SOME GAMES ARE REALLY BEST SUITED TO THE PC."
—DR. GREG ZESCHUK, COFOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, BIOWARE

COLUMN

GLADSTONED

IN MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER GAMES, TWO SEPARATE, YET EQUALLY IMPORTANT, GROUPS REPRESENT THE PLAYERS: THE GMS WHO INVESTIGATE COMPLAINTS AND THE SENIOR GMS WHO PROSECUTE THE OFFENDERS. THESE ARE THEIR STORIES.

BAD BOYS

ONLINE GAME masters get a bum rap. They aren't trying to spoil your fun. They aren't hall monitors or meter maids puttering around in those annoying little motorized idiot carts looking to cheese you off. These people are cops—game cops, walking online beats. When someone calls in a complaint, the GMs are the first responders.

Rather than simply wonder what it must be like for these guys on a daily basis, I asked Sony Online Entertainment if they'd let me enter the pit and ride along for a day with the *EverQuest II* GM squad. Sixty people, rotating in shifts, patrol the game world 24/7. Everything you're about to read is true—only some names have been changed.

WANT THE JOB?

The Gig: Game GM.

Required skills: The patience of a saint; amazing attention to detail; a lot of detective work; good communication (and typing) skills.

Work hours: Usually an eight-hour shift, but you need to be willing to work any time of day.

CASE #4893419: THE NAME GAME

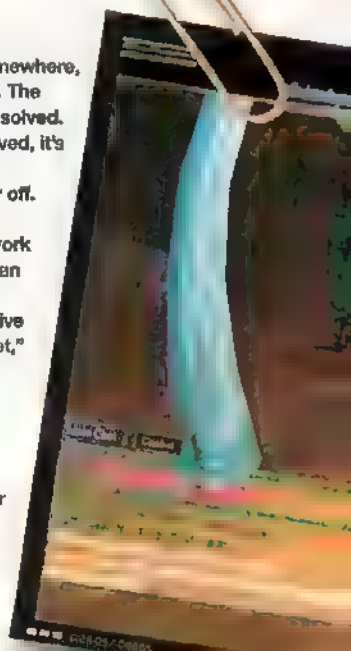
3 p.m. PST. The beginning of prime time for the GM squad. Somewhere, a ticker scrolls, indicating how many people are currently online. The customer-support system shows that 1,063 issues need to be resolved. With two new expansions released and two servers recently moved, it's going to be a busy night.

The remote tool allows GMs access to all characters, online or off. Whether it's giving gold or wiping debt, this is the most powerful weapon GMs have. In the past, shady employees have tried to work the system. Now there are weekly avatar audits so that no GM can abuse that power. Damn.

After a quick training session, the first call comes in. An offensive name—my specialty. "This is the most common complaint we get," says Joe "Lead GM Nikolah" Paolinelli. "You should be able to handle this one." Time to hit the virtual streets.

GM Gizmo > Greetings, Artemis. My name is GM Gizmo. Thank you for reporting the name violation. We are currently looking into the situation. Just out of curiosity, where did you spot the character in question?

Artemis > I take it that something will be done about the rather offensive nature of the name that was reported? My wife and I



were in Thundermist Village, Thundering Steppes when we both noticed him running about.

Artemis > And also, as she rightly pointed out, given that children do also play this game, it was rather a borderline name to have been allowed through the filters in the first place.

GM Gizmo > Don't worry. I want to assure you that names found offensive will be dealt with. You know how it is; people come up with new ways to fool the filters all the time. As a result, bad names get added as we find them.

Artemis > Understandably, you all have a lot of people to monitor and names can slip through.

GM Gizmo > Yep. Now I'm off to track down the offender. [A quick check in the remote tool and...] Looks like he's now online. Before I close out your ticket, is there anything else that I can help you with?

Artemis > I do appreciate your swift response in getting back to me concerning this matter, and just to let you now, GM efforts are appreciated. :)

GM Gizmo > Thanks for the kind words. /smile

Artemis > There is nothing else at this time, and I wish you a pleasant evening :)

GM Gizmo > Right back atcha.

Our tipster leads us to the caves downtown where we find the player, Hibal Doesitfrombehind, midfight. At least he didn't name his character "The Sodomizer." Strangely, he doesn't put up much of a fight with the character name. He's even polite about it. Since his character is a sneaky backstabber, the name fit—but Hibal concedes, "I can see where that can offend someone." Choosing to go the Cher route for the moment, he loses the surname. He'd better choose wisely next time. Or else he gets another visit from the name police./

CASE #4885955: PILFERED POTIONS

5 p.m. PST. Nine-hundred seventy-nine tickets to go. At least I get a break in the action for a few minutes. That's when Amy "GM Kimbial" Leo lobs a blue energy drink my way. "*EQ2* GMs love Bawls," she jokes. I guess I'm part of the team, so time to chug. Leo is a wiz with forensic searches. Yes, if someone made an *EQ2* CSI, she'd eagerly work the crime scenes. As she sifts through reams of data strings, the GM tools help her track down mishandled funds. If the game, or another player, screws you out of some items or gold, you want her on your side. In Demitrian's case, a game loophole made him lose loot.

GM Gizmo > Greetings, Demitrian. This is GM Gizmo. Do you have a moment to discuss your petition?

Demitrian > Sure do.

GM Gizmo > Our records indicate that this character was previously known as Charlan on the lavastorm server and that you claimed the reward on 12/15/2005.

Demitrian > That's correct; however, I didn't receive the items listed. [Through a series of Boolean searches, we find the problem. A mix-up occurred, likely because of the name and server change. According to Leo, most of the time the job boils down to backtracking and looking at past activities. You'd be surprised to know that just about everything you do in-game, shy of cybering, is logged and stored for reference.]

GM Gizmo > You actually used one on January 7th, 2006. So we can reimburse you for two, but not three of your field repair kits. As for the rest of the items...

Demitrian > I don't understand how it's possible, but I'm willing to take what I can get at this point to put this to rest. I did receive the TS potions, but I'm not a tradeskill person, so I didn't use them. >

I can really use those adventure potions, though.

GM Gizmo > OK, just give me a few minutes, and I'll reimburse your adventure potions.

[illegible] Thank you.

GM Gizmo > You are now loaded up with drinks. So go get loaded. You should now have two six-month and two one-year adventure potions. Drink 'em in good health. Can I help you with anything else?

[illegible] Thank you for the help; I very much appreciate it. One more thing: Can you see my character right now?

GM Gizmo > Sort of.

[illegible] > I just wanted to say that this was the best armor I've seen in-game and to ask your opinion. Heh.

GM Gizmo > Sorry, I'm not in-game at the moment, but I'm sure that the armor looks fetching on you.

[illegible] You made my day! Good evening!

GM Gizmo > Bottoms up! (With the potions, that is.) G'night./

CASE #4896107:
GOLD-FARMER STING

8 p.m. PST. You know where the bad neighborhoods are in the real world. Same goes for finding bot farmers—they aren't tough to spot if you know where to look. *EverQuest II* underwent a massive farmer sweep two weeks prior to my visit. "Yeah, [MMORPG services company] IGE is none too pleased," jokes Charles "GM Melovari" Mastrangelo. But, to nobody's surprise, the botters and gold farmers always come back. Currently, Mastrangelo is in the middle of a sting operation. A busted gold farmer cracked under pressure and ratted out his friends in order to avoid getting banned. No honor among thieves. We find Agupo, a suspected gold farmer and botter. One tip-off: They'll have a set group of character slaves (usually a healer, a couple of wizards, and a fighter to absorb hits) aiding with roughly the exact level of experience.

Makes me wish I could just type "/kill" and be done with him. According to Mastrangelo, that's what it was like in the good old days. "Before Sony got involved, it was a little like the Wild West," he says. In one case, a flagrant farmer camped at the top of a mountain. The GM jumped in, took control of the character, and made it take a nose dive—*all* while the player watched. I don't have that option.

GM Gizmo > Greetings, Agupo. This is GM Gizmo. Please respond. [Five minutes go by and he continues fighting sandcrawlers, ignoring me. I get enough of this in real life! Mastrangelo says that many times they don't respond because they don't know enough English to fake it. Have I found my very first gold farmer? I try talking to another member in the "group."]

GM Gizmo > Greetings, Faustna. This is GM Gizmo. Please respond. [Five minutes, no answer. Let's try someone else here.]

GM Gizmo > Greetings, Roipk. This is GM Gizmo. Please respond.

Roipk > why. Hail.

GM Gizmo > That's a nifty carpet. Where'd you buy it? More important, is it one of those hybrid carpets? Does it get good mileage?

Roipk > go [He starts running. Is he trying to make a break for it?]

GM Gizmo > Hey, wait for me!

Roipk > Hail, Gizmo. [He finally says...four minutes later.]

GM Gizmo > They treating you well in China?

Roipk > why?

Faustna > ....

Roipk > i'm doing quest

GM Gizmo > How is that quest going for you?

Roipk > you *EQ2* GM?

GM Gizmo > What if I were? Say, I'm curious, how much do you make a day? [A couple of sandcrawler raiders interrupt our conversation.] Now where were we? Right, you get enough money for doing this?

Roipk > lol

GM Gizmo > I have a riddle for you.

Roipk > You work?

GM Gizmo > Is that a philosophical question? Well, honestly, not really. Anyway, here's the riddle: How much wood could a ratonga chuck if a ratonga could chuck wood? [Not surprisingly, I'm ignored for the next three minutes. After yet another gold-farming battle...]

Roipk > sorry, have matter

Roipk > Hail

Roipk > hello

While the lack of response isn't a good sign, poor grammar isn't enough to ban them. Still, Roipk and his gang get tagged for a full investigation. That's someone else's problem, though. My shift's over. / Darren Gladstone

Darren Gladstone
Got a bone to pick with Gladstone?
E-mail him at darren_gladstone@zifdavis.com

5, 10, 15 JUNE 2006 A look back at the way we were

2001

[illegible]

1996

[illegible]

1991

[illegible]

ELECTRIC MAYHEM

Messing around online

I LIKE *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*. Unfortunately, I possess the attention span of a coked-up ferret. By now, I probably have a character of every possible race and class combination, none of which will ever make it past level 10. That's why I'm so thrilled when a friend graciously lets me get behind the wheel of Miracles, his level 60 night elf druid. "Don't mess any scratches on him. And my honor rating is really good, so try not to gank anybodies."

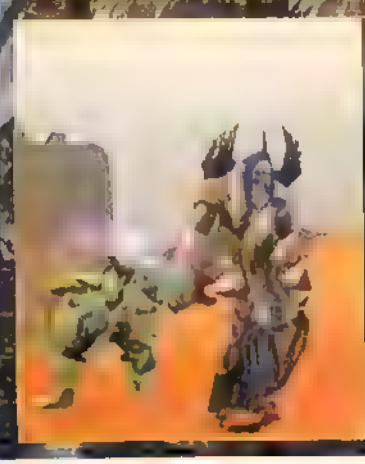
Whatever I do to them is [illegible] as long as they don't [illegible] from [illegible] I can live with that. / Scott Sharkey, with additional mayhem from Mike Nguyen

Miracles' toy bag is a walking endorsement for the engineering skill. One widget transforms him into a snowman. Excellent for greeting players when they enter scorching wastelands. Now couple that with his snowball-making gadget. Ah, yes, snowballs. Perfect for building a snowman or just pasting people in the face with when they don't tip me for welcoming them to the desert.

Another useless toy in Miracles' bag o' fun is a Discombobulator Ray. As cool as that sounds, I wish they'd just called it "Gun That Turns Enemies Into Leper Gnomes." I would've added it sooner if they had. It's not exactly devastating in a fight, but a faceful of free leprotic gnomedom is greater making someone's day weird. Level crap characters actually seem relieved that I'm just shooting them full of the creeping crud instead of kicking their heads clean off their torsos. Who would've thought that giving people diseases was such a great way to make friends?

I think I actually peed myself a little when I find a Gnomish Mind Control Cap in Miracles' stack of doodads. Sadly, my plan to stake out a bridge and extort passersby for lap dances was less than successful. I forget to take into account that I don't speak Nordish and that it's not possible to use pantomime to communicate a concept like "Shake your butt or I'll take over your brain and make you hang out on the bottom of the lake until the bubbles stop coming up." It's just as well, though, when I discover that Miracles has a piccolo I can use to force people to dance for me, anyway.

Oh, sweet hemorrhaging Jesbus—I have a Shrink Ray. I think this might be the warmest, fuzziest moment of my life. I can give someone leprosy, shrink them to action-figure size, take over their mind, and force them to dance—all at the same time. Then, when it wears off, I can Rocket-Helm them into dreamland and hit them with snowballs while they sleep. I've never seen anyone run away as fast as the guy did when he finally woke up. I think he would've been happier if I'd just killed him.



Goblin Rocket Helm, huh? Wow, does that ever sound like a bad idea of Wile E. Coyote-esque proportions. Wait! It stuns people! For 30 seconds! That's, like, three years in *WOW* time. I'm not allowed to kill these poor guys, but hey, I can fight them down into the red, rocket head-butt them into unconsciousness, and then walk away contemptuously. Yeah, I could've owned you, but I have stuff to do. "Rocket Helm" is actually goblin-speak for "Pimp Hat of Making n00bs Hate You."

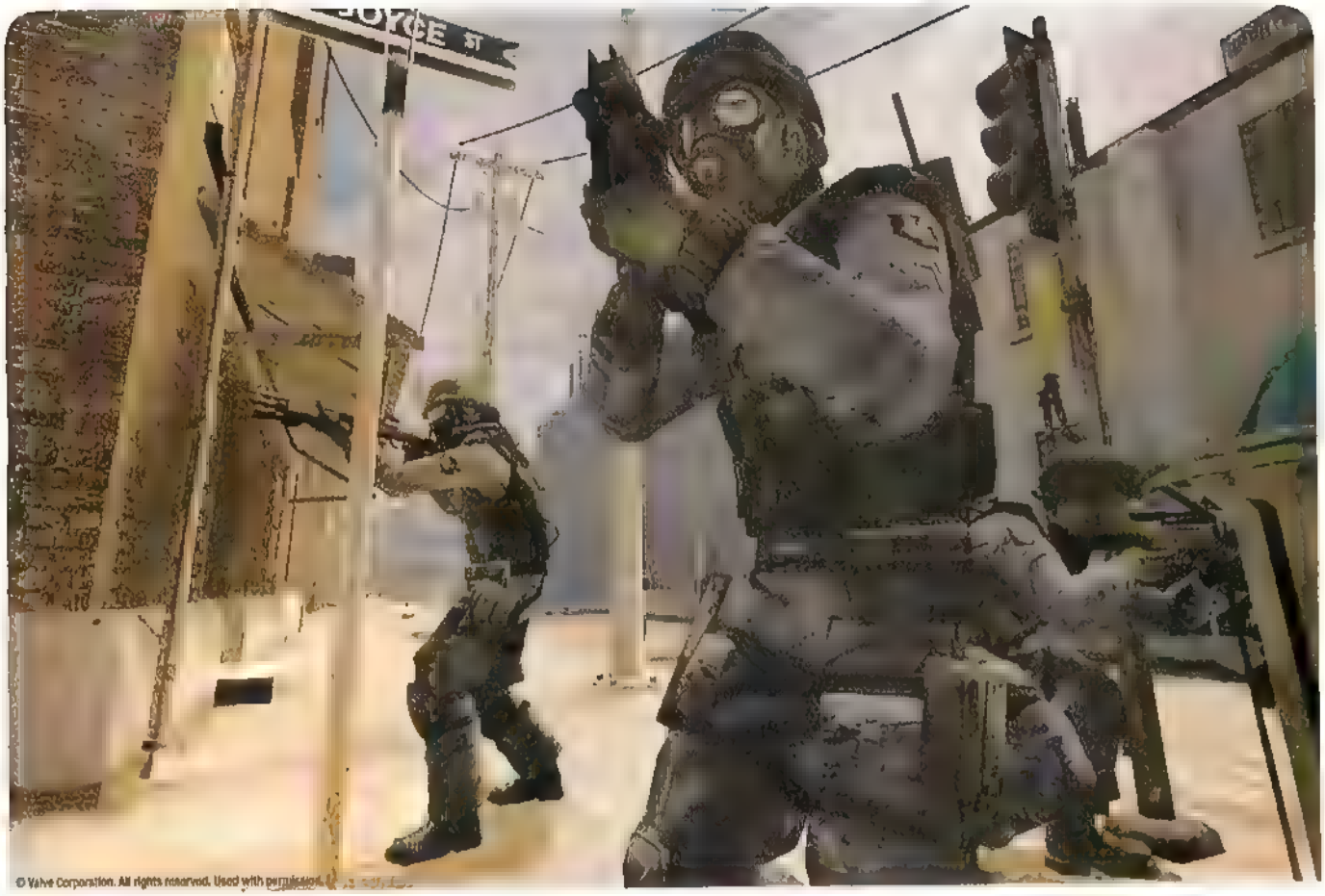
Gaming in 3D: Professional Power

As professional gamers, Team 3D travels the globe to compete in tournaments from China to New York City and beyond. Because they spend so much time traveling, being able to focus on building their skills while away from home really helps them keep up with the competition. But wherever they go, they know that the right hardware can make all the difference in their game. With the latest technology powering their PCs, they have the extra edge to win. "We choose Intel® dual-core based PCs because, as professional gamers, we want to focus on our game and we want to focus on winning," says Dave Geffon, aka moto. "Today's laptops are as good as any home PC, and even better because they're mobile and just as powerful," says Ronald Kim, aka Rambo. On their most recent global trek, Team 3D made sure to get in as much practice as possible. "We were gaming on the flight back from China," adds moto. "That's the great thing about the laptops: It doesn't matter if you're at home or in the park; you can really play any game on the go."

WIN BIG!

Log on to the 1UP Network for your chance to win a gaming rig powered by Intel's first mobile dual-core processor!

Now your [illegible] answer four simple questions about Team 3D and you [illegible] win a laptop powered by an Intel® dual-core processor to take your game to the next level. (Hint: The answers can be found in this advertisement and in the downloadable video interview.)



intel Competitive Edge

Maintaining your edge is what competition is all about. "I really like the competitive aspect of professional gaming. It is like any other sport," says Josh Sievers, aka Dominator, who takes his career as a professional gamer very seriously, as do all his teammates. It's crucial that their PCs are up to the challenge. "It's kind of like racing a car," Dominator adds. "You don't see a professional race car driver driving an old jalopy around for 500 laps. You need a top-of-the-line rig to play these games." Team 3D trains three to five hours a night, five nights a week. But even all this practice can't guarantee victory. As Rambo notes, "Any team that's on fire can win on any given day. So we pretty much expect every match to be our hardest!" Gameplay performance is a huge part of maintaining that competitive edge, especially with today's hardware-intensive games, which is why Team 3D relies on the power of Intel® dual-core. "We're seeing 30 to 40 percent increases in performance," says moto. "A lot of the new games are really pushing the envelope, but the right hardware makes the experience that much more fun."

GET TO KNOW TEAM 3D

Want to know more? Go to [illegible] to download the video interview.

Watch the video interview and [illegible] the best [illegible] on the pro gaming circuit. [illegible], Dominator, Volcano, method, sheGuer, and moto from Team 3D's *Counter-Strike* squad and learn how they first got into the sport, what their favorite games are, and why they use Intel's dual-core processor.

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DVD

KISS KISS BANG BANG

$20, AMAZON.COM

A dud in theaters, this black-comedy detective flick really had some of the most memorable dialogue in years. Unfortunately, most of that dialog is not appropriate for a wholesome, family friendly magazine like ours. Will it find its fans on DVD? It's already found a couple here at *CGW*.

PULP

EXTERMINATORS

$3, DCCOMICS.COM

It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it. Yes, we've found a comic book about the day-to-day trials of an extermination company. As you might guess, some messed-up stuff goes down in a comic dedicated to vermin. A knife-wielding, rat-faced rat killer. Chemically augmented cockroaches. And that's just issue #1.

DVD

FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN

$19, AMAZON.COM

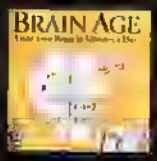
Anime fans and slaves to Square Enix's classic console RPG get a new story that picks up after the events of the original *Final Fantasy VII*. If you dig all the gorgeous, imaginative cut-scenes from the recent games, get ready for some sweet fights... Just brace yourself for the confusing plot that strings them together. Don't know what the hell's going on? You're not alone—and the disc helps you play catch-up with all the cut-scenes from the original game. It's like a 32-bit silent movie!

MUSIC

HARD-FI: STARS OF CCTV

$13, AMAZON.COM

This U.K. band breaks onto U.S. airwaves with an eclectic mix of fist-pumping rock, Ibiza grooves, and some jiking Brit second-wave ska. The opening song, "Cash Machine," is a 3-minute gripe about being perpetually broke. The track "Better Do Better" creeps in slowly and then builds into a rock tirade about some loopy ex-girlfriends. This isn't a CD—this is senior editor Darren Gladstone's life. Download a few tracks and listen for yourself...then pity him.

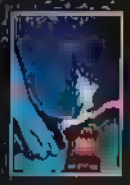


DS GAME

BRAIN AGE

$20, EBGAMES.COM

What?!?! A fun game that actually teaches you something? Inspired by the research of noted neuroscientist Dr. Ryuta Kawashima, this mental obstacle course sharpens your mind and grades your progress. A number of tests—and over 100 sudoku puzzles—provide you with a numerical output of your "brain age." Of course, the more cynical among us here see it as a couple of steps above the toddler toys that teach you that the cow goes "Moo!"



PULP

NIGHTWING

$2.50, DCCOMICS.COM

DC Comics continues to shake things up in its pulp universe with the "One Year Later" story arc, which picks up a year after the *Infinite Cash*—or—*Infinite Crisis* crossover. One comic in particular follows the adventures of former Batman sidekick Nightwing, who's now living in NYC and framed for murder. Strangely, the current Robin also gets framed for crimes he didn't commit (in the Robin comics). Coincidence? Find out next month. Same bat-mag, same bat-page.

FLICK

THANK YOU FOR SMOKING

$10 MOVIE TICKET

Former pack-a-day previews editor Shawn Elliott should get an extra-big kick out of this take on the tobacco industry. Lobbyist Nick Naylor makes his living defending smokers' rights, and this screwy tale gleefully shows how he spin-doctors the truth. Sure, smoking kills... but why would the tobacco industry want to kill off its customers? "We want to keep them alive as long as possible!" That glorious logic makes this movie a must-see—it just gets a little too preachy when Nick has second thoughts about his kid seeing what he does for a living.

SPORE

DINOSAUR PLANT

$5, THINKGEEK.COM

Excited for EA's upcoming planetary-evolution sim *Spore*? Check out a plant that refuses to evolve: During the Carboniferous period, these plants (don't bother asking what they're called—we can't pronounce it) grew to over 120 feet tall; when the dry season hit, the trees eventually withered into tiny balls that could be windblown to a new oasis. Or the neighboring cube. Because 290 million years later, you can buy 'em on the Internet. Pretty sweet, eh? Finally, the perfect plant for the lazy botanist!

POCKET CHANGE: $ 4.50

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games!

MAY 2006	
Art of War: High Treason	Atari
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Funcom
City Life	CDV Software
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Heroes of Might and Magic V	Ubisoft
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	Microsoft
Rogue Trooper	Eidos Interactive
Rush for Berlin	Paradox
Snow	2K Games
TimeShift	Atari
X-Men: The Official Game	Activision
Zoo Tycoon 2: African Adventure	Microsoft
JUNE 2006	
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Tri Synergy
Cars	THQ
FlatOut 2	Vivendi Universal
Front Mission Online	Square Enix
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox
Magic Knight Apocalypse	Namco Bandai
The Movies: Stunts & Effects	Activision
NFL Head Coach	Electronic Arts
Phantasy Star Universe	Sega
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
Uncharted Waters Online	[redacted]
JULY 2006	
Prey	2K Games
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	Microsoft
SUMMER/FALL 2006	
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Software
Company of Heroes	THQ
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Half-Life 2: Aftermath	Valve Software
Just Cause	Eidos Interactive
Madden NFL 07	Electronic Arts
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
Spectrum: Project Wolf	Tri Synergy
Titan Quest	THQ
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard

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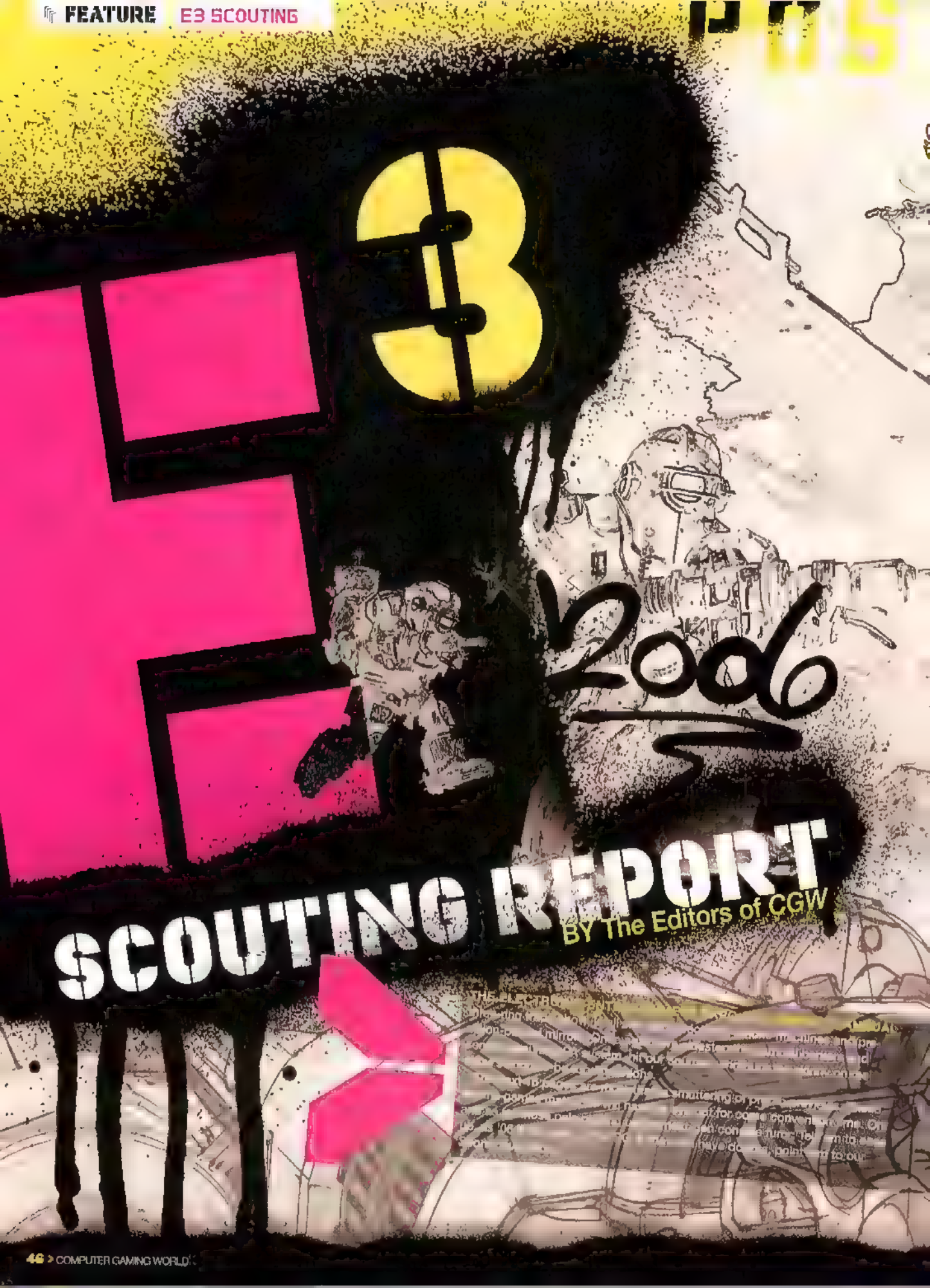


SCOUTING REPORT

BY The Editors of CGW

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Epic Games GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: When it's done

^ Axon (shown here) and Necris forces marshal army-specific vehicles.

AT ONCE ON POINT AND CROSS-current, *Deus Ex* maestro Warren Spector agitates that, "Rather than striving for something new and wonderful, we [developers] go with the tried and true, making assumptions about what players want and need based on what they've wanted in the past." Enter cyber-sports hopeful *Unreal Tournament 2007*—emblematically "brighter, bigger, better"—but does it also embody what we've told devs we want with our dollars? Can it be tried and new, true and wonderful?

"When you work with a franchise like *Unreal Tournament*," counters producer Jeff Morris, "it's negligent to not do everything you can to ensure that the people who bought the previous iteration buy the new one. At the same time, all developers want to innovate, and *UT2007* has its 'new and wonderful' elements, too. Onslaught mode and vehicles were *UT2004*'s major additions. We're expanding their role in *UT2007* even more with two complete categories of vehicles, the Axon and the Necris." Not so much a case of cake and eating in Morris' mind than one of circumscribed innovation, with novelty focused where it's likeliest to pay dividends, figurative and literal.

Among *UT2007*'s new moneymakers: the paladin mobile escort. Never mind its middling turret and less-than-menacing blitzkrieg; instead, the paladin's operator-rotated force field proves indispensable to flag returns and fighting retreats. Imagine the shooter savant in a sort of *Arkanoid*-play, fielding incoming fire with left-right mouse shoves as allied infantry cowers close. As for offense, the open-topped cicada flyer offers nimbleness and cluster missiles at the price of personal protection (Epic isn't dittoing *Halo 2*'s jeep-jacking, but doing so might improve its ever-precarious infantry-vs.-vehicle balancing act), whereas the revamped SPMA coordinates its eye-in-the-sky camera with mouse-precise designating to batter the front from afar. Other change is either largely under wraps (we know that Unreal Warfare mode is to *UT2007* what Onslaught's territorial tug-of-war was to *UT2004*, but little beyond that) or less prominent.

Is *UT* prohibitively twitchy? Says Morris: "Many developers consider the first 15 minutes of a customer's time critical in whether he or she plays a second or third session. It makes multiplayer more difficult, in that we don't have as much control over opponents or challenge level." Bring on matchmaking to mitigate the imbalance. *UT2007* is taking the PC into what had long been the forever-out-of-reach realm of console FPSes (namely, *Halo 2*). Details pend, but, according to Morris, Epic has "come up with some effective ways to ensure that players aren't matched up against opponents well outside their skill range. We're not leaving it up to chance." And while many of us want the community and competition only plugged-in play offers (it's just the defeat anxiety we don't dig), offline types can count on automated good company. "Distinct personalities and voice command," says Morris, "are only two of the ways we're anthropomorphizing our A.I. opponents for more convincing single-player matches."

/ Shawn Elliott

>> ...DIN'S OPERATOR-ROTATED ...FIELD PROVES INDISPENSABLE ...TURNS AND FIGHTING RETREATS.

MEDIEVAL 2: TOTAL WAR

PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: The Creative Assembly GENRE: Strategy RELEASE DATE: November 2006

the flavor of the [illegible] capture that." Ri[illegible] (the game spans from [illegible] late 11th century to 16[illegible] required Creative Assembly's Au[illegible] office to retool *Rome: Total War*'s engine well beyond 2004's hit RTS.

THE REAL WORLD

The first obvious change from [illegible] board to the 3D topographic [illegible]

[illegible] pain monopolies on [illegible]

Princesses: These diplomatic units can [illegible] the rival factions. And as is typical in marriage, this is how you get control of your new [illegible] hubby general. The success rate of a princess depends upon her ability to charm—which grows over time—and what you have to offer in marriage (e.g., vast tracts of land). We're already planning ahead: an army of hussies to take over hostile forces through sweet-talking!

How is it that the original *Medieval* [illegible]

[illegible] game. He will give [illegible] des, [illegible] pe[illegible] stay [illegible] Pope [illegible] lls [illegible] vor [illegible] y, [illegible] visi[illegible] [illegible] to [illegible] ge [illegible] w vo[illegible] allie[illegible] [illegible] ain en[illegible] nd "deal [illegible] Pope. Then you're free to [illegible] own Crusade.

The other place the game [illegible] really on [illegible] from the original *Medieval* is that you can also conquer Central and South America. In case you were curious, yes, you can play as the Aztecs and at least 12 of the 21 factions in the game. (What we know so far is that you'll also be able to rule Scotland, Venice, Portugal, France, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, and Turkey.)

diesel 2 [illegible]

[illegible] or your next comm[illegible] will decide what to do [illegible] e enemies they can [illegible] s blocked by friend[illegible]

[illegible] will be a key element of gameplay, [illegible] comrades? Bodies will not only [illegible] our unit's troops, but [illegible] de through a mass of [illegible] we checked. Score one for [illegible] that allow this [illegible]

[illegible] being more [illegible] is the siege combat. Castles [illegible] look tougher than ever. However, once you start knocking down walls, they remain rubble until repaired. We'll see [illegible] the dogs of *Total War* let loose this fall.

Dennis Gladstone

[illegible] improvement for the battlefield. The screenshots here, for example, show that each individual soldier looks unique, with different weapons, heads, bodies, faces, and helmets. Thousands of motion-captured animations make it so that you don't see a vast army of clones marching into battle. Even finishing moves help sell the drama of fast and bloody choreographed combat.

[illegible] grap[illegible] and [illegible] or your next comm[illegible] will decide what to do [illegible] e enemies they can [illegible] s blocked by friend[illegible]

[illegible] the terrain, look[illegible] counterattack. Now, personally, [illegible] overlook [illegible] terrain and we're really [illegible] off. Word has it that this season's will not only change the look of the [illegible] but also affect battle outcomes. [illegible] director Bob Smith of Creative Assembly, Australia pull it off? Troops from [illegible] mates will be disadvantaged [illegible] troops from the north or those [illegible]

RUMOR MILL

SAVAGE 2: A TORTURED SOUL

PUBLISHER: S2 Games DEVELOPER: S2 Games GENRE: RTS/FPS with just a hint of RPG RELEASE: Fall 2006

"THERE WERE A LOT OF THINGS THAT we wanted to do with the first *Savage*, but didn't," says S2 Games' COO Jesse Hayes of the groundbreaking RTS/FPS hybrid series. *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul* continues to pioneer the way for this new metagenre. However, the six-man team from Rohnert Park, CA, is looking to do more than just add a new coat of paint.

Among the biggest problems for this sequel to overcome is the original game's learning curve. *Savage* had no tutorial or practice mode against A.I. Online, it was sink or swim—resulting in confused RTS-mode commanders and more team-voted coup d'états than in a third-world nation. While there won't be a single-player campaign, Hayes says *Savage 2* will provide offline training on a few maps. Personally, we'd prefer the ability to load up any map we want with bots, but who are we to complain? The offline and limited LAN play mode will be available for free to promote the full game.

Another fundamental change is the RPG factor. First time around, each class was more powerful than the last you created in the tech tree—very RTS-like thinking. For *Savage 2*, the different classes will be emphasized with unique abilities as you gain levels on a map. The goal is to better balance the classes than to simply dole out more hit points. While the experience won't carry over to the next game played, there will be persistent stat-tracking. Maybe you'll get a shinier suit of armor or something for special achievements.

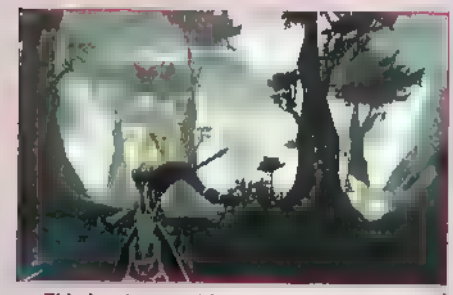
As Hayes puts it, "We're trying to take traditional RPG elements [and incorporate] them into an FPS in new, innovative ways." More innovative than what *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* are doing? That remains to be seen, but we'll be on the lookout at the show. / **Darren Gladstone**

Not to be outdone by *Peter Jackson's King Kong*, Rocky tries making a name for himself.

Why is it that the hulking purple creature with six rows of teeth is always "the bad guy?"

WOW: THE BURNING CRUSADE

Two good-looking blood elves contemplate the ethereal satisfaction of ganking n00bs.



This is where we'd put a screenshot of the new race, if Blizzard would just tell us already.

PUBLISHER: Blizzard DEVELOPER: Blizzard GENRE: MMO RELEASE DATE: Winter 2006 if we're lucky

MURLOCS? DRANAEI? UM...WISPS? The rumors have been running rampant about the still-unnamed new player race in *The Burning Crusade*, Blizzard's upcoming expansion to *World of WarCraft*, with rabid fanboys and -girls flooding message boards with such mind-bending questions as: How would a metal helm fit over a murloc head? And far be it from us to irresponsibly add fuel to the fire with our own speculations on the matter, but based on our own insider knowledge, we do have two words for you: green slime. Remember, you read it here first!

In other news, Blizzard informs us that the expansion is proceeding apace, though what exactly "apace" means to a company that moves at such glacial speed on new releases remains to be seen. Perhaps it will be released in our lifetimes. Perhaps not. What we know for sure is that when it does come out, *The Burning Crusade* will be humongous in scope—especially for an expansion—with Outland, an entire new world to explore, and all-new zones in the existing world of Azeroth for both newbs and high-level players alike. Speaking of "high-level," that too is changing, as the level cap is going up to 70, which Blizzard promises will encompass a lot more new content than that "mere" 10-level increase might convey. Furthermore, Blizzard promises abundant new endgame content for level 70 characters—good news for those who know that the "real" game begins after you've capped out, anyway.

You may note in this write-up the distinct lack of any new information. Very observant of you! That's because Blizzard is holding its cards to the vest until E3, and even our highly placed spies and plants, who dug through Blizzard's garbage cans and even—in a misplaced and somewhat dangerously delusional Jack Bauer–esque moment—held one development team member hostage, found nothing new to report.

We remain just as excited to see it as you are, though. And seriously, here's our real guess: murlocs. That's the bet we're taking to Vegas. / **Jeff Green**

RUMOR MILL

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X

PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios DEVELOPER: ACES Studio GENRE: Simulation RELEASE:

PUFFY CLOUDS AND PRETTY PLANES get you only so far. *Flight Simulator X* wants to indulge you with captivating close-ups by finally populating its ghostly grasslands, mountains, forests, and cities with automobiles, highways, houses, boats, farmland, livestock, and wildlife. Factor in new aircraft (eight in all, including the deHavilland DHC-2 Beaver floatplane, the Grumman G-21A Goose, the Air Creation 582SL Ultralight, and the Maule M7-260C Orion with wheels and skis) and visible perks from shaded rivets and reflective paint to the glint on glass and chrome, and you have the outline for what Microsoft's calling "the most significant [version of its franchise] to date." Missions also matter big and tally 50-plus. Not more rustic "buzz Mt. McKinley" reverie either, but serious hard-won hypotheticals, say, fighting forest fires in the Rockies, rescuing North Sea oil workers from exploding platforms via helicopter, or bringing relief aid to the Congo. Online gets a boost as well with what Microsoft's dubbed a "connected world." Roleplay pilot or copilot with friends or other aviators, direct traffic from the control tower, take your mom for a virtual sightseeing spin, or sweet-talk your semester-abroad significant other during a twilight flight...even if she's on the other side of the globe. / **Matt Peckham**

▲ *FSX* packs in more than 24,000 airports with A.I.-controlled jetways and fuel trucks.

▲ As if the landscapes weren't lush enough, *FSX* intends to breathe literal life into its virtual vistas.

AGE OF EMPIRES III: THE WARCHIEFS

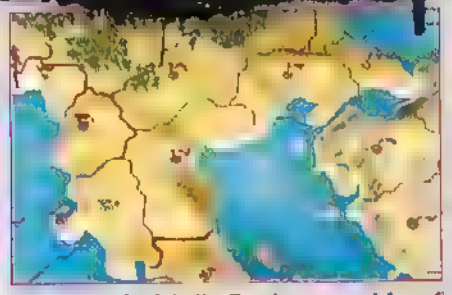
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios DEVELOPER: Ensemble Studios GENRE: Strategy RELEASE: Fall 2006

PINHEADED SCORE-SQUAWKING aside, we fancied *Age of Empires III* OK; we just didn't want to, like, have its baby or anything. Love or just kind of like it, the core game won't be changing in *The WarChiefs* expansion, but *AOE3* fans can look forward to three new Native American civilizations, unique units for each (like foot archers and musket cavalry), a 15-mission campaign, and enhancements to existing European civs that include new Home City content, units, and deck-stacking ops. "The natives have to solve the same problems the Europeans do," explains lead designer Sandy Petersen. "But they obviously do so in different ways. Each Native American civilization has unique features that enable it to deal effectively with the Europeans while maintaining a unique tactical identity."

Was the company concerned about stereotypes? "It was particularly challenging because of all the myths about Native American history we had to weed through," says Petersen. "For example, many believe Native Americans were technologically conservative, when in fact they were inventive and innovative and could adapt incredibly quickly. The Iroquois, for instance, incorporated European gunpowder and steel weapons to conquer the western tribes and control the trade routes to Canada." When it arrives this fall, maybe you will, too. / **Matt Peckham**

▲ In addition to fending off the Europeans, you'll also fight tribe-on-tribe, such as in this "rescue the hostages" scenario.

EUROPA UNIVERSALIS III



▲ Welcome back to the Renaissance and Age of Enlightenment in the series' first fully 3D game.

PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive DEVELOPER: Paradox Interactive GENRE: Strategy RELEASE: Spring 2007

PICK YOUR DATE AND WHET YOUR political prongs: For its third act, real-time magnum-strategy series *Europa Universalis* intends to drop fixed-start scenarios and let you take your pick, sandbox style, of 250-plus countries at any point during the 300 years bridging the fall of Constantinople (1453) and the French Revolution (1789). Anchored in feedback from 17 *EU*-derived games, *EU3* adds greater control over the Holy Roman Empire, a new national idea system (in which you can level up your country's attributes), historical bonus-wielding personalities like Newton, Mozart, and Descartes, and named combat regiments to replace the previous games' abstract numbers. In fact, everything from *EU* and *EU2* (save the mission system) makes the jump intact.

The biggest take-notice change is probably Paradox's shift to full 3D, giving you a topographically plush world map that'll finally scale to higher resolutions and let you skim or zoom over 1,700 provinces and sea zones in more than two dimensions. Don't stress feature flood either: Paradox plans to make over everything from ergonomic 2D layovers to the number of panel- and map-poking mouse clicks.

At its core, of course, *EU3* flexes historical fidelity, at least in terms of kickoff variables; where you go and who you become, how to, or backstab once the clock's ticking is still up to you. / **Matt Peckham**

BROTHERS IN ARMS: HELL'S HIGHWAY

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Gearbox Software** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

BROTHERS IN ARMS' SQUAD-ENABLED MO features the so-called "four F's of engagement": find, fix, flank, and finish the enemy. So it's been, and so it'll be in the Unreal Engine 3-fueled sequel, *Hell's Highway*. As Gearbox president Randy Pitchford points out—finger wagging—his olive-drab ideal isn't Duke-era movieland, isn't *Medal of Honor*. Tactics matter most, and death is definite. This installation picks up in Dubya Dubya Two's Operation Market Garden as Allied paratroopers converge over Holland, on their way to "Hell's Highway"—the Allies' nickname for Highway 69, the operation's drop point. New to the series: bazooka and mortar crews, and, with them, more room to think outside the killbox in big wide battlefields. Because some buildings and cover chip, scorch, and crumble when blasted, direct hits bury dug-in Krauts. Other upgrades include naturally integrated narrative (think *Half-Life* chatter as opposed to cut-scenes) and under-wraps camera tech that highlights what Pitchford calls "cool stuff" without sacrificing first-person consistency.
/ **Shawn Elliott**

CGW: How does [WWII] veteran and Hell's Highway historian George Koskimaki respond to *Brothers in Arms* as a game? Is he concerned about the medium trivializing or glorifying the reality of his lived experience, perhaps even more so than a movie might?

Randy Pitchford: George literally wrote the book on Hell's Highway; in some ways, having his approval and hearing his praise was more important than the millions of copies we've sold with the series so far. We know from firsthand experience that many veterans and veterans' groups are very skeptical of videogames about war due to the way other developers treat the subject, so it's important to us to create something that the guys who were actually there could endorse.

CGW: *Medal of Honor*'s going airborne, and, like *Call of Duty 2* and *Hell's Highway*, it emphasizes less-linear level design. As a whole, WWII FPS franchises seem to be emphasizing the same features. Do you think that this a case of developers inevitably converging on a limited pool of promising options, or is it something else?

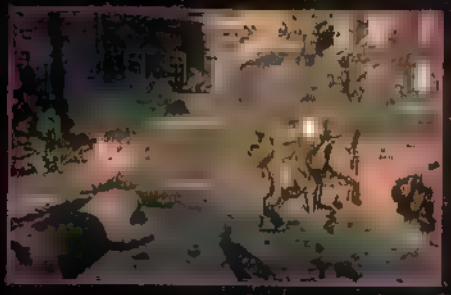
RP: *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* share the same roots—they wrapped a solid *Quake*-like FPS in WWII themes. Now, in terms of history and presentation, their treatment was in keeping with an 11-year-old's take on the entire war in Europe. Their focus was on making more environments, improving graphics, and trying to tell other theaters of the war.

Brothers in Arms is about freedom and [illegible] in a squad comprised of legitimate characters. Other teams are copying our approach—[illegible] and surveying actual battlefields; using [illegible] reconnaissance images, military maps, [illegible] after-action reports, eyewitnesses, and [illegible] ans to reconstruct history that history [illegible] haven't. Everyone isn't naturally con[illegible] these ideas. I think it's easier to notice ide[illegible] work and copy them. But *Brothers in Arms* [illegible] of turned it upside down, shook things up. [illegible] started on this path a long, long time ago, even before *Allied Assault* launched.

We're an independent developer and can do whatever we want, and we're totally wrapped up in this stuff. With *Hell's Highway*, we're taking things to a whole new level. I'm expecting to see some of the risks we're taking copied. It won't [illegible] surprise me when some big public publisher comes out with something called *Brothers: Call to Arms for Medal*. I'm sure it's coming—it's only [illegible]

Hell's Highway's fighting men emote more than skullcheck and trouser-soiling fear.

>> "WE'RE GOING TO SEE A DRAMATIC JUMP IN THE FIDELITY OF PC GAMING ONCE VISTA IS OUT." —RANDY PITCHFORD, PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE



▲ Once impenetrable, cover now degrades under continuous fire.

▲ New machine-gun crews tripod and man their .30 cal at a moment's notice.

a matter of time. And when it does, I think it'll be pretty obvious that it's the product of marketing analysis and some suit's executive decision.

CGW: Are next-gen naysayers assuming too much from static screens? Are we underemphasizing animation?
RP: "Next gen" may seem incremental because, in the PC space, it is. We've had high-definition for some time now. For months, we've had videocards that can compete with the new consoles. But, because content typically lags behind at the level of a two-year-old computer, we're anticipating Windows Vista and DirectX 10 and the new hardware that will drive the next generation of PC games. We're going to see a dramatic leap in the fidelity of PC gaming once Vista is out, and it's not going to come from the port of *Halo 2*. It's going to come from new games from independent developers like Gearbox.

CGW: Is taking control of a player's head movement, forcing him to see specific things at unspecified times, a situational analog to scripting? Is straightforward scripting starting to wear thin? What wins in a given situation—story or freedom?
RP: Entertainment wins. Dynamism wins. We love freedom. Even so, we hate missing cool stuff. Developer demos from when we first started playing with physics simulation in FPSes were far cooler than anything that's ever shown up in a game. We're convinced that there are ways to put the coolest stuff in front of players without jolting them uncomfortably or yanking them out of the experience. If we can find ways to do that dynamically, the experience gets better in terms of entertainment, too.

CGW: What challenges does this solution create? (e.g., "Stop looking at that shot-up soldier, what with the machine-gun nest in front of me!")
RP: You can't interrupt core gameplay with story elements—that's a fundamental rule and will be law soon enough. Gearbox is treading new ground with this stuff, and we've had to learn the rules through prototype and proof-of-concept work. But I'm hesitant to break down these solutions before the game comes out, because everyone is going to copy us once it does. Developers are already copying us.

CGW: Are you concerned with personalizing violence and/or sensitizing players to combat? Not making the game so brutal that it's not fun to play, but conveying more of what Spielberg was after with *Saving Private Ryan*?
RP: I take it as a personal responsibility to push things, to use our medium to create meaningful experiences that relate to the human condition. Otherwise, we're stuck with more complicated iterations of game loops that are fundamentally not much different than pinball—a series of skill tests dressed in the flashy themes of culturally relevant subject matter. We're better than that. Interactive entertainment is more important than that and we're going to play an increasingly relevant role in shaping the future of the world. We can have gaming as pastime and hobby, but we can also evolve the videogame as a legitimate meansof expression.

With *Hell's Highway*, we're getting closer and closer to rendering lifelike people and places, which is important when you're trying to convey actual emotion. We're doing things in real time that go beyond what Pixar did in its first prerendered films, and I know how well the Pixar stuff engaged me on a storytelling level. As an industry, we should be beating those guys. After all, they're passive, where we're interactive.

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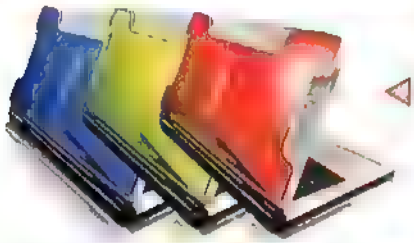

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SID MEIER'S RAILROADS!

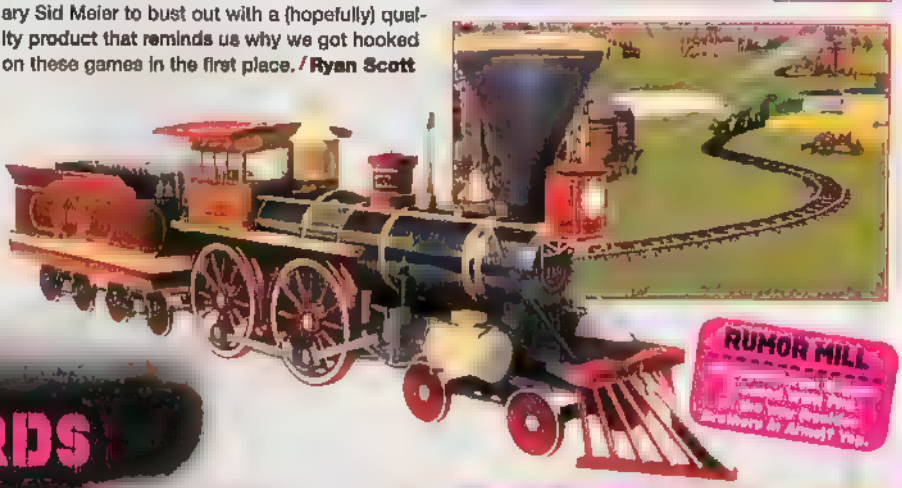
PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games GENRE: Strategy RELEASE DATE: October 2006

THE ORIGINAL *SID MEIER'S RAILROAD Tycoon* kicked off the tycoon strategy craze way back in 1990, and now Meier's giving the genre another go. The series' fourth iteration, *Sid Meier's Railroads!*, sports a shiny new title—sans the *Tycoon* part—but aspires to capture the same classic gameplay elements that appeal to shrewd virtual businessmen and choo-choo fanatics alike.

Armchair tycoons know the drill: Build trains, lay tracks, ship your goods, rake in the dough, and rule the railway industry with an iron fist. Creative players can use the built-in map editor and LocoBuilder (we don't make these names up, folks) to craft custom scenarios, maps, and locomotives. And for especially competitive capitalists, *Railroads!* features real-time multiplayer support.

Yeah, yeah, we know—it's a train game. As boring as that sounds, its predecessors did invent an addictive new strategy gaming subgenre...and with stuff like *Game Tycoon* and *Prison Tycoon* flooding store shelves today, we can't think of a more perfect time for the legendary Sid Meier to bust out with a (hopefully) quality product that reminds us why we got hooked on these games in the first place. / **Ryan Scott**

▲ Reginald Forteasque protests the shame train's proximity to his summer retreat.



RUMOR MILL

CIV 4: WARLORDS

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firaxis Games GENRE: Strategy RELEASE DATE: July 2006

OPPORTUNISTIC GAME PUBLISHERS act with shocking speed these days—once a company finds itself with a certified hit on its hands, you can count on an expansion or a sequel in record time. Case in point: Less than six months after *Civilization IV*'s October 2005 release, publisher 2K Games unveiled *Warlords*, the first expansion to the popular Sid Meier–branded turn-based strategy game.

Expect the standard array of offerings here, including six additional civilizations, more unique units, a few gameplay balance tweaks, and nearly a dozen new historical civilization leaders (each with his or her own stylized caricature, of course). Six original scenarios, ranging from the Peloponnesian War of ancient Greece to the Vikings' raids across Europe, fill out the expansion.

Call us crazy, but so far this sounds like the prototypical plug-and-play update. Maybe we just have high standards, but when games like *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* accomplish a sequel's worth of feats with each expansion, it makes these sorts of six-month rush jobs look that much more stale. At the very least, we hope *Civilization* developer Firaxis learned from its mistakes with *Civ 3*'s expansions—we want a *Conquests*-caliber add-on here...not another *Play the World*.
/ **Ryan Scott**

▲ New factions. New units. New historical scenarios. Just add water? We hope not.

PARAWORLD

PUBLISHER: Sunflowers DEVELOPER: SEK GENRE: Strategy RELEASE: Fall 2006

▲ No tiny dinos here. *ParaWorld* boasts full-scale prehistoric predators in funky rainbow armor.

DON'T CALL IT *DINOTOPIA*. SEK'S prehistoric RTS *ParaWorld* doesn't want to redefine the genre so much as declutter it. "Playing a strategy game is about action and response, about using units and resources as extensions of your strategy and tactics," says developer SEK. "It shouldn't be about looking for units." Disdaining camera hunts, minimap hot spots, and keyboard shortcuts, SEK has developed an "Army Controller" (AC) component that lets you survey units at a glance in a slimmed-down sidebar: Scan the map stock-still, peg threatened units, scout worker activities, and even transact commands like transporter load-ups. The developer hopes the AC interface will revalue tactical talent by getting gamy camera-lurching out of the way.

Replete with XXL dinosaurs (at least 40 of them), nine ability-focused heroes, and five climatic zones that impact resources and indigenous wildlife, *ParaWorld* lets you tromp through its bloom-suffused 3D realms as distinctive Norsemen (Viking-inspired), Dustriders (African-inspired), or Dragon Clan (Asian-inspired) tribes. Recruit specific heroes to balance tribal weaknesses, or just tinker with different structures and control up to 50 combat units with unique special and finishing moves. Whether the AC can cram all that into an easy-to-use panel remains to be seen, but we're certainly all ears, eyes, and fingers. / **Matt Peckham**

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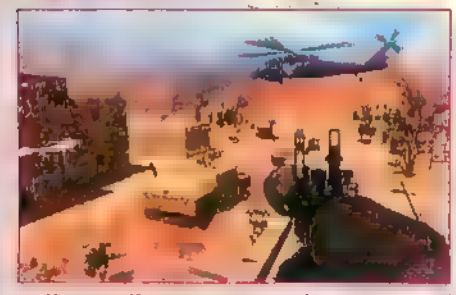


▲ Not sure if you want to play in FPS or RTS mode? Why not both?

PUBLISHER: TBD DEVELOPER: Digital Reality GENRE: RTS/FPS RELEASE: Winter 2006

HIDDEN IN SOME BACK CORNER OF last year's E3, *Ghost Wars* promised modern, squad-based RTS tactics and FPS action. Sure, it stood out, but when prospective publisher Hip Interactive bellied up mid-2005, we feared the operation was FUBAR. Now with a new name, *Field Ops* seeks a North American publisher at this year's show.

Why are we still hot on this game, in light of similar upcoming genre benders such as Ubisoft's *Faces of War*? The idea behind *Field Ops* remains unique and rock solid—even a year after it first enlisted. For this report, Hungarian developer Digital Reality gave us exclusive intel: a rough build for basic training.

Play the game entirely as an RTS if you want. Alternatively, hit the enter key and take direct control of a solider for some *Battlefield 2*-ish action. No word of an unlockable merit system to match, but you do get the class variety (more so, really, as each side sports nine unique classes). Medics heal, snipers snipe—you get the idea. Also, like *BF2*, you have direct control of military vehicles (although more from a third-person, action-based control scheme) and can commandeer civilian cars. Everything you see is usable and fully destructible.

Although *Field Ops* is largely a single-player experience, the multiplayer mode shines by letting you tackle opponents in "terrorists vs. field ops" scenarios. By far the most twisted way to kill we've seen: suicide bombing. The terrorist team has a suicide-bomber class with little more than a detonator as a weapon. Sprint (or drive) into a crowd, then mash the button in first person. Subtle it's not. A few RTS games have had suicide bombers (*Command & Conquer: Generals*, for instance) but nothing quite like this.

While some folks won't be so keen on that special ability, *Field Ops* faces a few other hurdles. For one, Digital Reality can't dawdle on a release date. Since the game spans RTS and FPS genres, its graphics need to be extra sharp—shooter graphics never age gracefully. Next, the A.I. actually needs to be intelligent. Since you can directly control individual units, the CPU needs to pick up the slack elsewhere. For example, if you lead a tank into an ambush and suddenly swap over to another unit, does the tank do more than sit still? Will it pull back and make a tactical retreat, or will it just wait to die? / **Darren Gladstone**

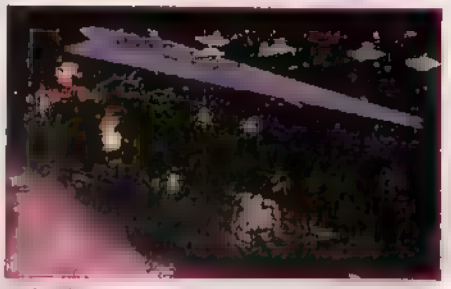
STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR: FORCES OF CORRUPTION

PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Petroglyph GENRE: Strategy RELEASE: Fall 2006

WHEN YOU'RE THE KINGPIN OF A "wretched hive of scum and villainy," greed is good. Greed clarifies. And greed might even net you an Eclipse-class star destroyer that's 11 times (17,500m) the size of the singles (1,600m) seen in *Empire at War*. Played out post-*Episode IV*, Petroglyph's *EAW* expansion puts you in the syndicate hot seat with a completely new Underworld faction. Play as Tyber Zann, Jabba-rival and would-be crime lord swindling or scrimmaging with the Rebel Alliance, Empire, or various pirate factions (including one led by *Shadows of the Empire*'s Prince Xizor), and wage guerrilla war your way with unique units, heroes, weapons, and corruption-angled abilities.

Packed to pouring-over, *Forces of Corruption* looks dressed to counter critics of *EAW*'s lethargic land game. Supplementing 13 new planetary maps (including Cloud City and Mandalore), land tactics now support custom base layouts and planetary forces. Take advantage of terrain modifiers and fiddle with chemical weapons, mines, holograms, camouflage, bunkers, troop transports—even ring for devastating orbital bombardments. LucasArts promises shrewder A.I. to make planetary battles as interesting as the already well-regarded space fare, which sees its own additions: cloaking tech, buzz droids, cluster bombs, shield leeching, and jamming devices. Are you scum enough? / **Matt Peckham**

▲ Jedi Luke's officially in, and so is Yoda. And so are several bounty hunters, such as IG-88.



▲ Don't mistake this for the 17,500m Eclipse—it's actually Vader's Executor.

ALONE IN THE DARK

▲ More sick twists than pretzel vendors with hepatitis!

▲ Beat the odds like an abusive sideshow manager.

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Eden Studios GENRE: Horror RELEASE DATE: Spring 2007

FEAR IS THE ONLY EMOTION GAME developers have mastered. You might not laugh or cry often in a game, but you sure as hell might jump out of your seat and turn the lights on. It's a subject David Nadal has considered at length. Currently directing what he describes as a "new vision" of the classic horror series *Alone in the Dark*, Nadal knows the ins and outs of our fears. But what is it about fear that translates so well to games?

"We don't need complex facial expressions to establish fear," Nadal says. "All you need to know is how to play with suggestion and the player's anticipation." In the absence of detail, be it in a dark alley or the simplified environment of a game, our minds tend to fill in the blanks. This was the secret of *Alone in the Dark*'s success back when it first appeared in 1992. Combining believably creepy interiors with sparse action and story-related puzzles, the game created a genre unto itself.

The new *Alone in the Dark* makes big changes to the formula it invented; it trades cramped, haunted hallways for the wide-open spaces of a true-to-life Central Park. "The game's gonna be like the real world in a way that hasn't been seen," says Nadal. Central Park—the grassy, tree-lined center of the cultural melting pot that is New York City—is also central to the game's theme, which revolves around strange and horrific events in the moments between life and death. "We're building the story from converging similarities between religions, cultures, and beliefs, as well as near-death-experience tales of those who've brushed against death," says Nadal. It's safe to assume that this realistic Central Park will have a dark, surreal side. / **Robert Ashley**

CRYSIS

▲ You can see just a hint of motion blur on your gun, and lighting interacts with and literally through every last frond and leaf. (God only knows what you'll need to run this game.)

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Crytek GENRE: Shooter RELEASE: Spring 2007

WRAPPED IN TRICK 3D GEEKERY designed to trigger Pavlov's drool centers, Crytek's CryEngine 2 certainly steps out in a lineup—just look at the screens from *Far Cry* follow-up (but not sequel) *Crysis* and decide for yourself. FPS haters, nothing to see here, move along, but devotees of wild and wide-range tac-ops could be getting a treat: Those visuals are only one part of the sweet total package.

You play as a U.S. Delta Force squad that's been HALO-dropped on a water-hemmed tropical island to reconnoiter an asteroid crash site sealed off by the North Korean government. Scuttling for gain, both sides are stunned when the asteroid cracks open, unsheathing a two-kilometer-tall alien ship. The ship sheds a crackling force sphere that flash-freezes huge swaths of the island and eerily alters the global weather system. You know what comes next (repel the "we munch on you" alien invasion, yada yada), but this time it's the how—not the what—that Crytek hopes will hook you.

Case in point, procedural A.I. plays front and center in *Crysis*, and Crytek claims you'll be clashing with a completely new kind of coordinated sophisticate. Enemies will notice bends in flora and have the ability to track trails or act in pack constellations to mitigate gamey lure-and-liquidate tricks.

Land, sea, and air vehicles like trucks, tanks, boats, and helicopters buttress your trip through a fully 3D ecosystem, from sand to sky to the zero-gravity interior of the alien ship itself. Weapons start at projectile-predictable but move to "mini black hole" interesting and maybe even innovative, with a special nanomuscular bodysuit you can customize by shifting energy to jump higher or run faster.

And while the aliens look a little HR Giger–esque at the moment, Crytek and Electronic Arts promise the final product will unleash a "totally original alien species that uses its senses intelligently and works in combination...the most challenging opponent yet in an FPS." Big words. Fingers crossed. / **Matt Peckham**

TABULA RASA

PUBLISHER: NCsoft DEVELOPER: Destination Games GENRE: MMORPG RELEASE: TBD

MMOS SOP UP HOURS BY THE hundreds, so getting in and out—and getting everything out of your monthly subscription fee—is worth its weight in gold (or whatever currency your guild prefers). Destination's Starr Long has an interesting take with NCsoft's upcoming story-soaked MMO *Tabula Rasa*: Save your character anytime, anywhere. Then pinch off a new carbon copy of yourself and put the nature-versus-nurture debate on the butcher block.

"We have the pace, interface, and interaction of a shooter," explains Long when asked how *Tabula Rasa* compares to a straight-up MMOFPS like *PlanetSide*. "But at its heart, *TR*'s an RPG, i.e., your character advances in attributes and skills over time based on experience gain." In this case, those skills augment damage and accuracy in point-and-pop combat. "There's also a real-time element that factors in," Long adds. "Think about a dynamic environment where there's a war constantly going on. NPCs fight each other, patrol, take command of control points, etc." If *PlanetSide*'s a straight-up shooter, Long describes *TR* as more of a story-based hybrid.

Swell, you're thinking, but still massively mouse-twitchy, right? Maybe not. "While the game is 'action packed,' it really is an RPG," says Long. "So anyone can play it. One of my favorite quotes is from [*Ultima* creator] Richard Garriott's brother Robert, who says, '*TR*'s the first shooter I can actually play!'" It's also the first MMO to bring save states to play space. Instead of picking a class before the game starts or before you've had a chance to suss out play styles, *TR* wields a progressive class tree. "Everyone starts as a recruit," explains Long, noting that players gain experience per the norm by killing enemies and completing missions. "But at certain levels you can make a choice about which branch of the class tree to keep progressing along."

RUMOR MILL

▲ An alien stalker struts through Torcastra Prison. *Tabula Rasa* already seems to have its own distinctive "curvy glistening carapaces" aesthetic.

Choose between soldier or specialist, level up a few times, then have a go at commando or ranger, for instance. "At any point you can save your character 'template' and use that as the starting point for a new one," says Long. "This allows you to explore all the branches of the tree." It's not clear how NCsoft plans to address situational penalties via save-and-reload, but "cleaving" your persona to veer off the straight and narrow sounds intriguing in theory. Who knows. But if it works, *TR* may be the first MMO to keep your playtime precious, and not repetitively punitive. / **Matt Peckham**

>> "WE HAVE THE PACE AND INTERFACE OF A SHOOTER."
—STARR LONG, COFOUNDER, DESTINATION GAMES

CALL OF JUAREZ

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Techland GENRE: Shooter RELEASE: Fall 2006

IS THIS HOW THE WEST WAS WON? By the Eastern Bloc? Polish developer Techland uses its Chrome engine to deliver a first-person shooter that doesn't take place during World War II. We'll be the first to admit that *Call of Juarez*'s Wild Western theme instantly made it a lot more compelling. However, we need to be certain this isn't just trading in an M1 Carbine and Nazis for six-shooters and "injuns."

Yes, there are going to be some of the tried-and-true staples ripped from classic films: the bare-knuckle barroom brawls and old-time shootouts at someone's corral. One of several novel ideas is being able to play the game from two different perspectives (and play styles) as either Billy Candle, accused of killing his kin, or Reverend Ray McCall, a gunfighter hot on Billy's trail. What we're really hankering to see in action is the multiplayer game. Objective-based matches will have you try to pull off train robberies. Alternatively, you and a posse of friends can hunt down the no-good varmints in co-op mode.

Will *Juarez* give a good taste of the Old West? So long as the characters don't sound like they're ordering pierogies, we're anxious to saddle up. / **Darren Gladstone**

BATTLEFIELD 2142

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **DICE Sweden** GENRE: **Multiplayer Shooter** RELEASE: **Fall 2006**

ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SIX YEARS far into the future is sci-fi...starships and spacemen, no, but sci-fi nonetheless. Runaway climate change iceballs earth, flash-freezing all but a hotly contested equatorial collar. What that means—insofar as it matters to the Euro Union and Pan Asian Coalition grappling for the Banana Belt—is war.

Where 20th-century bloodletting cleaved atoms and weaponized bacteria, the 22nd's latest wrinkles are ho-hum, as if developer DICE averaged all available futurist standards to arrive at *Battlefield 2142*'s unremarkable wheeled getabouts and rotorless, wingless flyers. Standout tech: A 10-meter-tall walking tank, *MechWarrior*-like and all right angles, and an armed UAV Cypher, stuck to a vamped support class. The former is menacing—an all-purpose weapons platform clomping through unlived-in-looking streets, stamping infantry, and torpedoing heavier hardware. And yet, for every Goliath, David windmills his sling.

Antitank troopers' hit-and-run rocket attacks worked in '42, work now, and will work in *2142*. Other newfangled options include EMP bombs that blind solo and stymie in batches, and mobile "chaser" mines, so called for their power to lock onto and pursue passing targets (see: *UT2004*'s spider mines). Plus, plastique—more useful than ever when used in conjunction with optic camo—returns to the spec ops rucksack for "now you see me, now you don't" delivery.

Our worry (and it's one echoed on message boards across Internetland) is how well *2142*—worse for the wear of its refurbished and comparatively bantamweight *BF2* engine—will perform cabeza a cabeza against competing visual powerhouses *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* and *UT2007*. It's a future rumble you'll referee. /**Shawn Elliott**

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—DARK CRUSADE

RUMOR MILL

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Relic Entertainment** GENRE: **Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR is one of the best RTS games in recent memory. The original game earned our 2004 RTS Game of the Year award—and its first expansion, *Winter Assault*, added a sequel's worth of top-notch content on par with StarCraft's now-legendary *Brood War* add-on. The second expansion, *Dark Crusade*, piles on even more goodies for RTS junkies and *Warhammer 40,000* tabletop geeks.

The far-future, postapocalyptic action unfolds on a planet called Kronus, where the tau—a new playable faction that excels at long-range, heavy-weapon combat, at the price of a horrible glass jaw—fights for supremacy against the necrons, who stand for death, destruction, nonexistence, and all the other bad stuff wise people expect from a race of evil, self-resurrecting metallic skeletons. The war between these two factions draws *Dawn of War*'s other five factions into an epic showdown, thus paving the way for *Dark Crusade*'s single-player campaign.

"*Dark Crusade* is going to dwarf *Winter Assault*," lead producer Jonathan Dowdeswell boasts. "We're adding a metagame that adds entirely new layers of strategy and [immersion] to the game. [It's] centered entirely around player choice. You can play as any of the seven races and you'll have to conquer 25 provinces in any order you like in your quest to control an entire planet. Your decisions will have a major impact on your army, the appearance and abilities of your commander, and the buildings you start with on each map."

Interesting...but we've all heard the "revolutionary new RTS mechanics" spiel, usually with results that fall to meet the hype. Still, Dowdeswell insists that *Dark Crusade* should "change the way people see the entire *Dawn of War* franchise." We're holding you to that, Jonathan. /**Ryan Scott**

THE MOVIES: STUNTS AND EFFECTS

▲ The new stunt school lets you hire or fire prospective stunt doubles.

▲ Nab special stunt achievements and unlock rewards by performing above the call of capers.

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Lionhead** GENRE: **Simulation** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2008**

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON, we hardly knew ya. Latex moss monsters cramping your celluloid? Try Lionhead's *Stunts and Effects* expansion for *The Movies* to turn your artsy A-movies into big-league B-movie camp. We caught up with concept-maharishi Peter Molyneux of Lionhead Studios for the drilldown.
/ Matt Peckham

CGW: What are some of the stunts you can pull off?
Peter Molyneux: We tried to cover a wide range of stunts in the expansion, but we wanted them to support content already provided in *The Movies*. A sample would be classic automobile stunts such as crashes and leaps, hand-to-hand fighting, and a fair bit of falling down, through, and over things—my personal favorite is swan diving through the glass of a third-floor window as the building burns in an inferno.

CGW: And the effects lineup?
PM: When we say "effects," we really mean three things: First, we've added a particle-effects engine to *The Movies*, which gives our artists and scene designers great control in creating and upgrading effects in scenes such as wind, rain, explosions, smoke, smashing glass, lasers, muzzle flashes, and lots and lots of fire. We've also created a way to deform all the cars in the game, so crashes can include cars crumpling as they hit and the windshields fly out.

In addition to the visual layer, we have "effects" as technologies in the game. These include new weather machines and effects upgrades [and] new types of parallaxing backdrops that move backward and forward as well as side to side. Also, things like miniature sets with models and an open-plan set, where the floor can be altered along with the backdrops so that the set can become any location the player devises.

Finally, we upgraded the Advanced Movie Maker and added a free camera so players can override the default angle in a scene, including the ability to blend different player-set angles and adjust the field of view.

CGW: How do stunts alter the sim dynamic?
PM: Making a movie with stunts does affect the simulation, but has its own inherent risks, [such as] stunts going horribly wrong. And then you have new awards and achievements for players to aim for, and these bring their own benefits as well.

CGW: Does the expansion augment existing tech?
PM: *Stunts and Effects* integrates fully with the original game. In planning, we came up with three types of players: those who'd never played *The Movies* before, those midway through the game, and those who'd already finished and wanted to get straight to the action. So upgrades to moviemaking tools and other interfaces are available immediately. Whatever year you're in, upon installation, new content will be seamlessly slipstreamed into your tech tree; there's also a quick-start scenario that gets you right into the 1960s and the core of the expansion.

CGW: Any plans for mod and online expansion support?
PM: Among other upgrades, we've added a feature to *Stunts and Effects* called "overlays" that—like backdrops—we hope players will add to and exchange online. An overlay can be added to any scene, such as rain droplets on the lens and the noise of a television set.

We built *The Movies* with user content in mind—backdrops, music, sound effects, and even credits. We've seen some super mod tools out there, with fans now creating their own costumes, adjusting sets, and adding props. It's not just the modding that's making the game's online community interesting—it's the experimentation and pushing of what the engine is capable of.

>> LATEX MOSS MONSTERS CRAMPING YOUR CELLULOID?

FRONTLINES: FUEL OF WAR

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Kaos** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE: **Summer 2007**

KAOS LEAD DESIGNER FRANK DELISE admits he's bored with serial connect-the-dots single-player gameplay. "It's time to leave it up to the individual," he says, referring to the fledgling company's forthcoming "dynamic" FPS, *Frontlines*, which instead renders zone progression in terms of capricious objectives. "Think of a front as a 'combat sandbox' where each contains a set of contextual objectives." Unlike those in *Call of Duty* or *Brothers in Arms* (though perhaps similar to those in the upcoming *Medal of Honor Airborne*) *Frontlines*' missions chute you in but let you parse out goals and execution order on your own dime.

Design director Dave Voypka adds: "It's go-anywhere, do-anything, nonlinear combat."

Culled from the core team behind ubiquitous *Battlefield* mod *Desert Combat*, Kaos comes packing name-brand talent, including dev pull-ins from *F.E.A.R.*, *Medal of Honor*, and *Doom 3*. Turning on a flash point politico-economic oil crisis between the Western Coalition (U.S./NATO) and the Red Star Alliance (Russia/China), *Frontlines* is an open-world, infantry- and vehicle-based FPS that lets you not only designate technical specializations ("roles") and specific weapons and equipment loadouts, but also fiddle with skills and abilities. Voypka offers hypotheticals like a "close-quarters" role with tactical shotguns, knives, and grenades, as opposed to a "recon" role, which might feature motion sensors, explosives, and reconnaissance drones capable of relaying enemy position visuals to allied HUDs or tagging incendiary targets.

Kaos licensed *Frontlines*' game engine to hit the ground sprinting, but plans to mod as necessary. "It definitely accelerates the development cycle and covers many of the headaches involved with shipping multiplatform," notes Voypka. "So we have time to combine elements you can't get from any other one game. Imagine the cinematic infantry battles in *Call of Duty* combined with the high-octane vehicle gameplay of *Battlefield*, complete with near-future weapons in an asymmetric war zone."

DeLise concurs: "It's the recipe that makes a new cake." This one certainly sounds tasty. / **Matt Peckham**

>> CULLED FROM THE CORE TEAM BEHIND *BATTLEFIELD* MOD *DESERT COMBAT*.

RUMOR MILL

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Eden Studios** GENRE: **MMO Racing** RELEASE: **Fall 2006**

IN SOME SENSE, *TEST DRIVE Unlimited* is an MMO on speed, and Atari is looking to attract driving enthusiasts and race freaks. The first trick is getting all the sweet rides. Want to hop on bikes or cruise around in a Ferrari Enzo? Knock yourself out. An utterly absurd amount of detail awaits—like windows that can roll down.

Next, you need to have interesting locales. How about 1,000 square miles of accurately mapped road in Hawaii? An incredibly detailed island of Oahu is where the entire game takes place. Cruise around, go on races in the single-player campaign (even build your own custom race courses), or just hunt up some real competition online. The interesting part is that you'll always be online if you want. You can select the skill level of players you can "see" driving down the streets, but you don't have to interact with them. Drop an instant challenge and race. In the same way that *Guild Wars* has shared hub areas, Atari's servers will let up to 60,000 players see each other online at once.

This looks like a much better realized version of what EA tried doing years ago with *Motor City Online*. But can Atari succeed where EA failed? / **Darren Gladstone**

GOTHIC 3

PUBLISHER: Aspyr DEVELOPER: Piranha Bytes GENRE: RPG RELEASE: Fall 2006

WITH OBLIVION'S "RADIANT A.I." THE current darling of the hour, it's easy to neglect the folks that gave us NPCs doing more than pull-cord prattling half a decade ago. Behaviorally distinct, proximally perceptive, scheduled, and richly personalized, the A.I. in fantasy-RPG series *Gothic* was sometimes startling, if only in scripted bursts. Unfortunately, its clunky mouse-lite interface and finger-twisting, key-mash combat tarnished its critical and consumer reception Stateside.

Gothic 3 hopes to upend those idiosyncrasies by chucking its original engine and interface. The new 90-percent-proprietary Genome 3D engine includes NovodeX physics and SpeedTree plug-ins—the latter churning out "vast amounts of trees and bushes with very little rendering time." Furthermore, everything remains 100 percent custom-made (even *Oblivion* has scads of randomly generated dungeons and related material), meaning that every last polygon is still constructed, textured, and placed by hand, maintaining the meticulously asymmetrical *Gothic* look.

Gothic 3's plot still places you center-solo as the "unnamed" hero of the prior installments, betwixt friends, foes, and plenty of shady go-betweens: orcs versus humans, humans enslaved, the capital city of Vanguard besieged...events have shifted from bleak to downright beastly. According to designer Kai Rosenkranz, the team dug in even further to flesh out the A.I. and give you plenty of ways to forge or forsake relationships. "We've added some powerful new features," says Rosenkranz. "Human relations pivot on a dual-layered interaction system." A new regional layer covers townwide attitudes, while a global layer governs wars and broad-stroke story points.

Oblivion versus *Gothic 3*? "They're both lovingly created, but with distinctive atmospheres," explains Rosenkranz. "It's like watching *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Both are devotedly created, great movies with different moods and different target groups." Rosenkranz says the *Gothic* series puts the emphasis on the living world and manifold behavioral patterns, while *Oblivion* offers square miles, NPCs, locations, quests, and items in large quantities. "Both titles have their pros and cons," he says, adding that he personally enjoys *Oblivion* very much. "I've heard that some devs at Bethesda love our stuff as well. Concerning our passion and lifeblood, we're all in the same boat. If *Oblivion*'s the pearl necklace, *Gothic 3* is the diamond. *Oblivion* is lush and opulent, while *Gothic 3* is smaller but shines a bit brighter." We'll see how bright come autumn.

/**Matt Peckham**

>> *GOTHIC*'S A.I. WAS SOMETIMES STARTLING, IF ONLY IN SCRIPTED BURSTS.

^ Hello, happy new visuals and point-and-click interface. That's right—you can finally play a *Gothic* game primarily using your mouse.

MASTER OF THE

Will Wright's SimEverything

BY JEFF GREEN AND DANA JONGEWAARD

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Maxis
GENRE Massively single-player strategy
RELEASE DATE 2007 (we hope)

PHOTOS BY MAXDOLBERG.COM

UNIVERSE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

In the beginning, there was one brain. Granted, the brain is the size of greater Cleveland, and yes, it is so big and powerful, it could eat most other brains alive. But it is still, in the beginning, one brain from which this project is born.

So when that one brain chose the substantially smaller brains at *CGW* as the first outsiders for an in-depth look at *Spore*—arguably the most revolutionary game of the past decade—we felt pretty damn honored. And we'd like to share that honor with you. Aren't you special! ›

HOW TO CREATE A GAME ABOUT

IN A GENERIC INDUSTRIAL neighborhood of Emeryville, CA, a few hundred yards from a bustling railroad line, in a brick office building that also houses some kind of scary biochemical lab, new life is born. Here, in EA's Emeryville studio, Will Wright and his dedicated team of programmers, artists, and animators are hard at work on their first non-*Sims* project since 2000. The *Sims* franchise, as we all know, exploded into an international phenomenon—the most popular PC franchise of all time, with sales of nearly 60 million copies to date.

So where do you go from there? What topic do you tackle after making a game that simulates human life itself? For Maxis cofounder and *Sims* designer Will Wright, the answer was to pull back the camera poised above those *Sims* households—way, way, way back. To encompass the entire breadth of not just one life, one household...but all life, for all time, both backward and forward through time. This project combines many of Wright's wide-ranging intellectual pursuits—astrobiology, theories on the origins of life, space exploration—with his instincts and ambitions as a game designer. It's a game so big that Wright first called it—quite seriously—*SimEverything*, before settling on the much-less-daunting-sounding *Spore*.

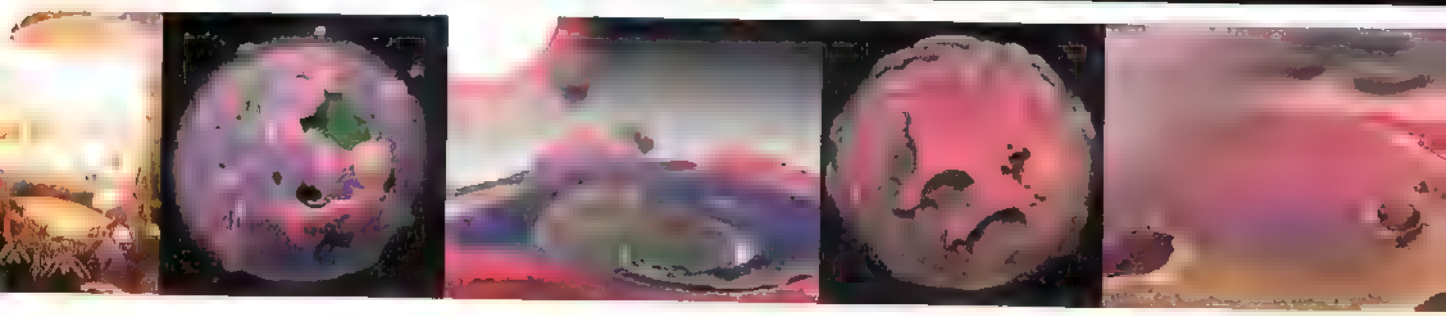
Rumors and hints about *Spore* have circulated ever since Wright made the surprise announcement at last year's Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, sharing just a few screens and basic gameplay concepts. The hype hit fever pitch at last year's E3 Expo, where it won Best of Show—based on little more than what Wright had shown previously. Radio silence went into effect at Maxis afterward, and the team hunkered down in a preproduction phase to get this beast of a game off the ground. But now, finally, we can see a little of what this team is up to and what *Spore* is all about.

ONE IS THE LONELIEST NUMBER

If a game once called *SimEverything* sounds a bit intimidating to you, then let's ground this discussion, for now, in the tangible—the easy stuff. *Spore*, first off, is a strategy game, just like *SimCity*, *The Sims*, and all of Maxis' other stuff. Your goal? The same as that of all living species: Survive. Multiply. Live long and prosper.

From your humble beginnings as a single-celled organism swimming in the primordial soup, you pass through generation after generation, evolving your physical form, learning how to live with or in competition against the other creatures on your planet. You choose your own path of evolution: Are you a giant, predatory, claw-wielding carnivore, terrorizing the planet's other species? Or are you a small, peace-lovin', tribble-like herbivore? Do you amble slowly across the land on your two gigantic legs? Or do you skitter quickly along on eight little toothpicklike limbs? Do you have a mouth on your foot? A foot on your head?

In *Spore*, you progress from evolving one single-celled organism to an entire race of creatures—and that's just the start of the game. Eventually, you'll terraform entire planets and conquer and explore distant galaxies... many of them occupied by creatures made by other players.



CREATING A UNIVERSE

▲ Dawn rises over a new planet, created by you. How's that for a sense of power?

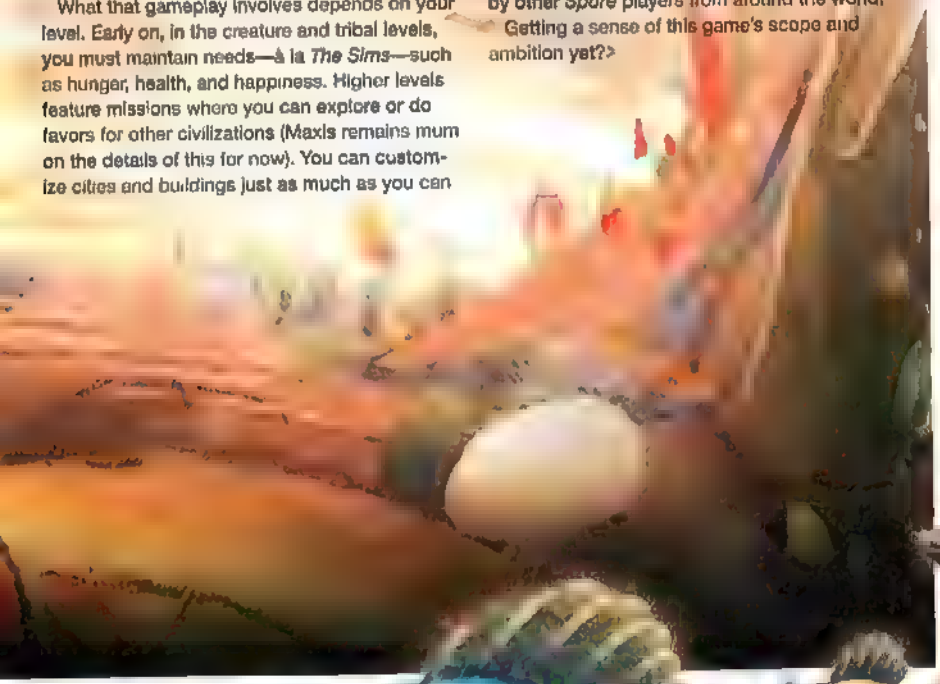
The design's left to your imagination—and the survival to your gaming skills.

Evolution's just the beginning, though. Once you prove that your species can survive, you must figure out how to grow and multiply—first into tribes and then into cities across your planet. To keep gamers focused, Maxis divides *Spore* into distinct, discrete sections as time passes (see the "*Spore* in 60 Seconds" sidebar at right), each with its own gameplay, goals, and missions—with the overarching goal of keeping your species alive until the next stage.

What that gameplay involves depends on your level. Early on, in the creature and tribal levels, you must maintain needs—à la *The Sims*—such as hunger, health, and happiness. Higher levels feature missions where you can explore or do favors for other civilizations (Maxis remains mum on the details of this for now). You can customize cities and buildings just as much as you can your creature itself, so fans of the *SimCity* series should find themselves right at home here.

And once you conquer the planet, it's time to move on even further: outer space. And you can design your own spaceship, too. According to the design team's current estimate, the galaxy contains about 400,000 stars, with four to five planets apiece. That adds up to roughly 2 million planets for you to explore—a number that would, says Wright, take players "67 years without sleep to explore." Oh, and all those other planets? They might house creatures and civilizations created by other *Spore* players from around the world.

Getting a sense of this game's scope and ambition yet?>



SPORE IN 60 SECONDS

A brief history of time

Spore exists as a series of discrete gameplay sections that unfold as you make your way up the evolutionary ladder. Here's a very rough breakdown of how long the team anticipates each stage should take average players.

CELL GAME

▶ Start as a single-celled organism and spend time in what is essentially the tutorial, learning basic game mechanics. The current rough time estimate for this section: about 20 minutes.

CREATURE GAME

▶ Evolve your creature so it can survive on the planet. Most players will go through 10 to 15 generations before hitting their peak form. The team projects roughly two to three hours for this part.

TRIBAL GAME

▶ Start to socialize with other creatures and develop a culture. The average amount of time that this portion of the game will take is probably about an hour.

CITY GAME

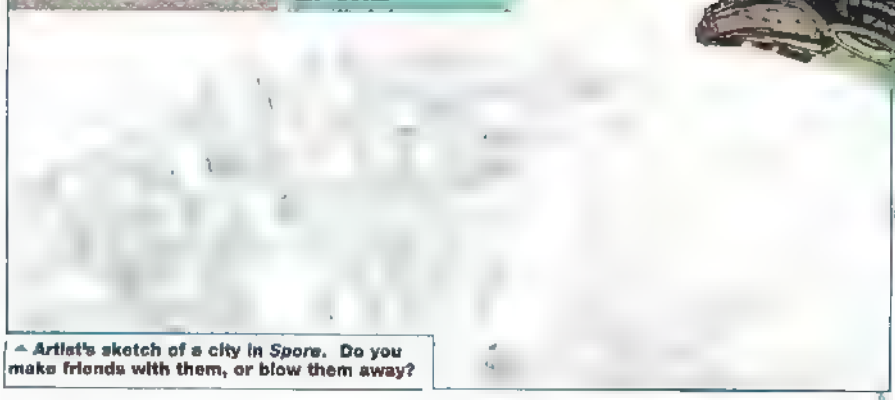
▶ Continue to develop your society, creating more complex communities and habitations...which will start to interact with other communities on the planet. This section might take players an hour or two to complete.

CIVILIZATION GAME

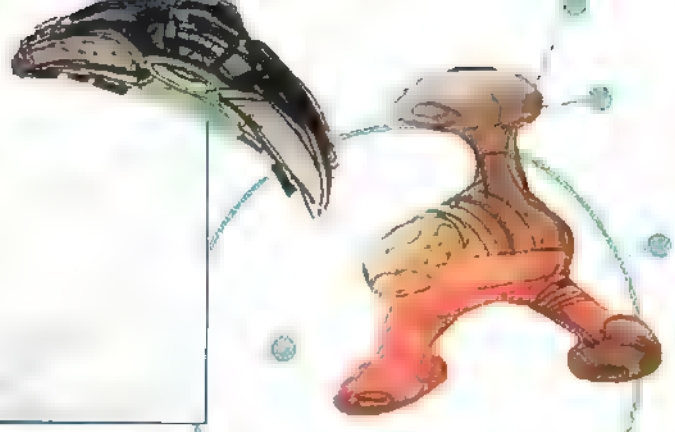
▶ Advance to more global domination through trade, diplomacy or war. Expect to spend two to three hours in this phase.

SPACE GAME

▶ Visit other planets, interact with the inhabitants, terraform the land, and seed it with life to see if it can evolve. How long you can spend here? How does forever sound?



▲ Artist's sketch of a city in *Spore*. Do you make friends with them, or blow them away?



"YOU DECIDE, IN THE WAY THAT YOU PLAY, HOW YOU ARE GOING TO EVOLVE."

—EXEC PRODUCER LUCY BRADSHAW

TEAM SPEAK

If it seems daunting to think about playing *Spore*, just imagine how it must feel to create it. While Will Wright serves as the high-profile brainiac fronting the project, *Spore* (like all Maxis games) is a team effort, and one that evolves in both concept and execution as more folks get involved in the process.

Executive producer Lucy Bradshaw, who's worked with Wright since the original *Sims*, is the brains behind the brains, guiding the project through the treacherous waters of preproduction. "We're basically working on three big things at once right now," she says. "The creature editor, the game technology, and prototyping [the] gameplay. The idea is that, by the time preproduction is done, we'll be able to marry the three and see where we're headed."

Because that first creature you design plays such a crucial role in how the entire game plays out, Bradshaw and the rest of the team are working diligently to get the creature editor just right—powerful enough to create any creature a player can imagine, yet simple and nonintimidating (see "Intelligent Design" on page 72 for our own hands-on impression of the creature editor).

NO' MONSTERS

If you missed 'em, go back and check out our staff "photos" on page 14—they were all created by us with Spore's creature editor.

▲ Dude, a mushroom planet! Jeff relives his college-dorm days.

Of course, you can't just create anything you want (no mechs, for example). You're limited by the aesthetic style of the game...something the team spent ages trying to nail down.

"We sketched everything first to discover an art style and experimented with all sorts of aesthetic looks," says Bradshaw. "We started with a more realistic style but then made it more playful. And part of the reason for that is that Maxis' content is always somewhat playful and stylized. It gives a little bit of forgiveness, in players' minds, when you go from cell to creature to tribe to city to civilization to space. The one thing you want is to be coherent across every single level, so the player isn't confused."

After nailing down a style, the team first sketched, and then modeled, what creatures might look like, creating hundreds of samples to work from. From there, they broke the creatures down by parts to give players a palette of pieces with which to construct their own creatures.

"How we broke down the creatures into parts was tied tightly with *Spore's* gameplay," says Bradshaw. "We knew, for instance, that the capabilities of the creatures were going to be strength, speed, perception, and [the ability to either be a] carnivore or [an] herbivore. So from there, we knew that there were going to be these particular sets of parts we were going to need. So we made sketches of ideas of parts, figuring out where we could get to in terms of breadth that would be satisfying for players. With mouths, for example, we knew we wanted birdlike, insectlike, carnivorous, on and on—enough room to give players the flexibility to be creative."

You won't make all your creature design decisions at once, but rather over time—as the creatures evolve, as you play, you earn evolution points, and when you amass a certain number of points, your brain (the one in the game, not your real one) levels up, which then grants you access to the next evolutionary level of body parts—which you can use immediately (unless you'd rather save up for more powerful parts, that is).

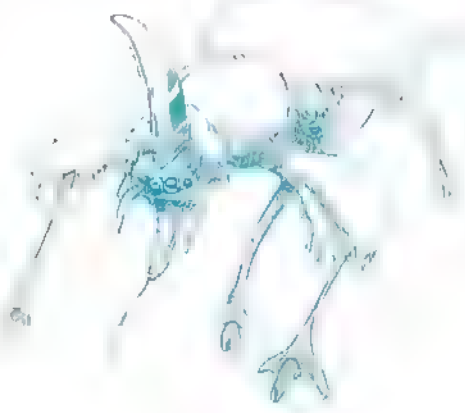
"You decide, in the way that you play, how you are going to evolve," says Bradshaw. "Are you going to take evolution points every time you grow to buy a better mouth? You may decide, while you're playing, that you're getting your ass kicked, so maybe you want your creature to go for speed instead, or strength. So the editor plays a key strategic role in gameplay, because the parts that you choose affect your capabilities within the game."

As you grow, and depending on *how* you grow, other creatures in the world may become more attracted to you as prey, further influencing your evolution. "You may decide you want to move fast, so predators can't catch you, or so that you can catch the prey you need to survive," Bradshaw explains. "You're reacting to a world evolving around you, and it's reacting to you." And what happens if you win the Darwin Award (as it were) and fail to survive as a species? Bradshaw grins. "You just return to the previous generation of the character you created and try again."

After you finish the evolutionary game and move from tribe to civilization to space, you can continue to tinker with various editors (vehicles, buildings, even planets) and try your hand at world building—but you eventually regain access to the creature editor. Once you start playing the space game, you can access to the creature editor "for free," where you can create more creatures whenever you like and seed them on other planets, fostering their growth and seeing what they evolve into. Will those creatures become sentient? Will they become the masters of that planet?

"Space," says Will Wright, "is the ultimate sandbox." And as he says this, he sits at a monitor, playing this early version of *Spore*, his spaceship hovering menacingly over an alien civilization. He ponders the notion of convincing them to worship him, before saying "Nah!" and blasting them with laser beams—and laughing as they outnumber him and force him to retreat into deep space.

Which only leaves us with one question... when do *we* get to play in the sandbox?



INTERVIEW

SIM BRAINIAC

The *CGW* gorillas approach the monolith

We took a golden opportunity to jump inside Will Wright's head over e-mail and during our Maxis visit. Honestly, we could fill this entire feature with quotes from him, and—to us, at least—it would never get boring. But for you, here are a few choice insights.

CGW: You seem to relish relinquishing control to the player. Do you think that's an unusual quality for the average game designer?
Will Wright: I think it's unusual at this point. But more and more designers are tending toward it.

CGW: Why does it appeal to you?
WW: I like it because I find that players can entertain me as a designer. I got endless enjoyment finding out how people played *The Sims* and seeing how they used the tools I gave them. With *Spore*, I'm providing a larger variety of more sophisticated tools, and I'm very excited to see what the fans come up with.

CGW: You implemented what you called "design subversion" into *The Sims*. Any conscious attempts to do that in *Spore* yet? Is it even possible to be subversive in a game where players possess control of the universe?
WW: Allowing subversion essentially requires [designer] to put a variety of goal structures into a game, with only some of them being overt. So a player can decide to make a creature with 12 legs, or befriend an alien race only to demolish them, and come up with that on his or her own. For me, half of the game experience is testing the boundaries. Because of the design tools we provide in *Spore*, I think there will be a lot of boundaries tested.

CGW: What do you look for in an employee?
WW: Passion is the first thing I look for. And I think it's good to find someone who has experienced a lot of failure because it shows persistence. Also, a pulse. A heartbeat always helps.

CGW: You're big on observing social behavior. Do you prefer playing games with other people or by yourself? Why?
WW: I like both for different reasons. When playing with other people, the game experience becomes the fulcrum around which the social interaction focuses. When I play alone, my brain can be playful, and free-associate. It helps me stay malleable.

CGW: How do you play games? Do you play to win, or do you play to test the boundaries?
WW: Usually I play to win once, to see the main path. But after that, I spend most of my time testing boundaries.

CGW: Is game development your dream job? If you hadn't become a game developer, what do you think you might have become?
WW: Yes, I guess it's my dream job right now. If I were doing something else, I think it'd be building robots.

CGW: Say you have a free afternoon with no other people around...what would you choose to do?
WW: Usually, I'll make something. Maybe a sculpture, or a robot, or a model.

CGW: We hear you have a collection of Soviet space equipment. Where do you buy it? eBay? Is the process of obtaining it classified? Do you have any smaller, less expensive collections?
WW: I get it everywhere: eBay, auctions, even people I have come to know in Russia who e-mail me when something cool comes in. Other than that (stuff), I'm not a big collector.

CGW: You once said that if you were God, you'd want to be the kind of God who surprised himself. When was the last time you surprised yourself?
WW: I surprise myself every day.

INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Hands-on with *Spore*'s creature editor

CGW editor-in-chief Jeff Green creates his alter ego in *Spore*.

SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT components of *Spore* are its content editors. Executive producer Lucy Bradshaw explains: "Under the hood, this is a complex [illegible] graphics program [illegible] Maya, but we want to put this in the hands of your average Sims player. It's something that anyone could pick up relatively quickly and have [illegible] ing experience. The first time through, you can make something pretty good, and [illegible] yourself with your own creativity."

Sure, that's easy for professional game designers to say. But what happens when average boneheads—like, say, the *CGW* editors—try to use it? Well, we got to sit down and create multiple creatures of our own (see this month's *CGW* staff photos on page 14 for a few examples), and it's [illegible]

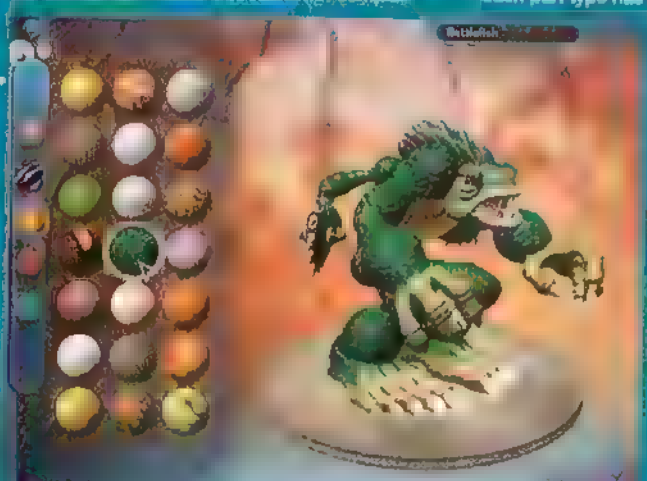
machinations lurking under the surface, it's amazingly simple. Click on the button to create a new creature, and the screen opens with a torso suspended above a little platform. On the left side of the screen are the seven different components you can add, labeled by icons: mouths, senses (eyes/ears/noses), limbs, graspers, feet, weapons, and details. Select a part and drag it over to the torso, placing it wherever you deem appropriate. And we mean wherever: [illegible] on knees? Arms out of the rear? A set of six multibranched legs? It doesn't matter what you choose to do—your creature adjusts to accommodate its (potentially unorthodox) placement of parts. Changing the length or angle of parts is accomplished by dragging with the mouse, and modifying part sizes just takes a dial of the mouse's scroll wheel.

Each part type has four levels, corresponding to the game's four brain levels that you unlock every two to three generations or so via experience points. Each time you advance, you get another column of parts, progressing from simple parts in the first column to better performing and more highly evolved parts as the game advances. All parts are sorted by function—such as herbivorous mouths [illegible] and carnivorous mouths—and display tool tip descriptions when you mouse over them (just like in *The Sims*), so you always know exactly how each part affects your creature. And, as with *The Sims* purchases, you can trade old parts in—at a discounted rate, of course—for more evolution points to put toward new parts.

Once you finish building your creature, you can paint it. Select a base color and choose the type of texture (scaly, smooth, or other), and then overlay it with accents such as stripe patterns, spots, fur, or myriad other options. Everything gets applied instantly, and the modeling formula makes it looks as if you spent hours—[illegible] days—hand-creating this character...which is exactly what Maxis intends. "You get beautifully painted creatures that would take an artist a week to do in Maya," says Bradshaw.

While the whole process sounds a bit [illegible] anything but. During the entire process, the creature reacts to what's going on. Add a mouth and you start to hear the sort of noises your creature will make. You can also test-run all the behaviors your creature might engage in, check out its punching ability, have it mating call, or see what a happy prance across the plains looks like. You can even see what a baby version of your creature looks like (which you can use in the game world if you [illegible] enough evolution points to mate).

As Bradshaw says, "Creativity should not be scary. It should be fun. And the [illegible] about this: Anyone can be creative." Even boneheads like us.



The creature editor's painting tools allow for endless user creativity.

> CREATIVITY SHOULD NOT BE SCARY. IT SHOULD BE FUN."
>
> —EXEC PRODUCER LUCY BRADSHAW

BODIES, REST, & MOTION

Spore's "creature team" on animating the unknown

WHILE CHARACTER CUSTOMIZATION has been a standard part of games for years, never before have players been able to create their own creatures of any size or shape from scratch...which presents a huge challenge to the animators on *Spore*. How do you animate creatures that, so far, only exist in players' imaginations? Executive producer Lucy Bradshaw, animation director Bob King, and animator John Cimino spoke with us about the unprecedented task of bringing an unknown cast of characters to life.

Lucy Bradshaw: Because the animators don't have a specific target to animate to, the animators aren't saying, "I'm going take this character and bring him to life," they're saying, "I need to make something that's going to work across anything." What they've done instead, is that [if the art team] has made a tool that says this is a grasper—something I can use to punch, no matter what it's attached to—their job is to make sure that punch animation works across creatures of different morphologies.

John Cimino: This is the most challenging project I've ever worked on for animation because it's the first time I've ever walked in and not known who or what the actor is going to be. I've got the script, and I know what motion I want to do, but I don't know who's going to play the part. The arm could be coming out from the back of the head, the stomach—and then he has to throw a punch. A lot of the problem is figuring out how many different animations we're going to have to make to cover all the varieties of creatures.

LB: Or maybe the character doesn't have any arms—so how's he going to wave hello?

CGW: So how would you animate that? What's the answer?

LB: Well, we have to classify creatures, to say, OK, creatures like this one, with no limbs, will have to have a different kind of animation for "hello"—a bow, for example.

Bob King: We never know exactly what will happen when we add an animation. *[King gestures to a creature on his monitor trying to clap hands—except its head's in the way.]* This is one of our more pleasant mistakes recently—this guy is smacking himself in the head. If we don't get the animation we want, we'll always take humor.

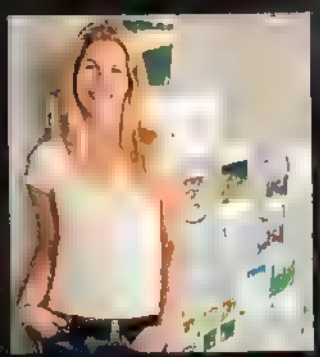
JC: And we always have the excuse of "Well, it's an alien; maybe that's how they do things!"

CGW: Aren't you worried that players will create creatures that are just so weird that they're impossible to animate? That the bodies would just "break" your animation system?

LB: We're hoping to hit 80 to 90 percent of what we think people will try to create, and animate accordingly. But, of course, there will be those players that want to try to break it and have weird and funny outcomes...and I'm quite fine with satisfying those guys, too.

BK: The key to it is to make the motions somewhat recognizable, so that's why we start out with a two-armed, two-legged creature and say, OK, what does everyone expect a punch to look like, and then extrapolate that across all the craziness we're anticipating from players. Our system is a lot like puppetry. Marionettes are drawn around, and action by the hand is not coming from the arm, but from the string pulling.

The best motions are the broad ones that can work from the back of the theater, but we're also going for subtle effects as well—like nuzzling—things people recognize. Sound carries the day—sound is so important. To get an emotion across, the sound has to be right.



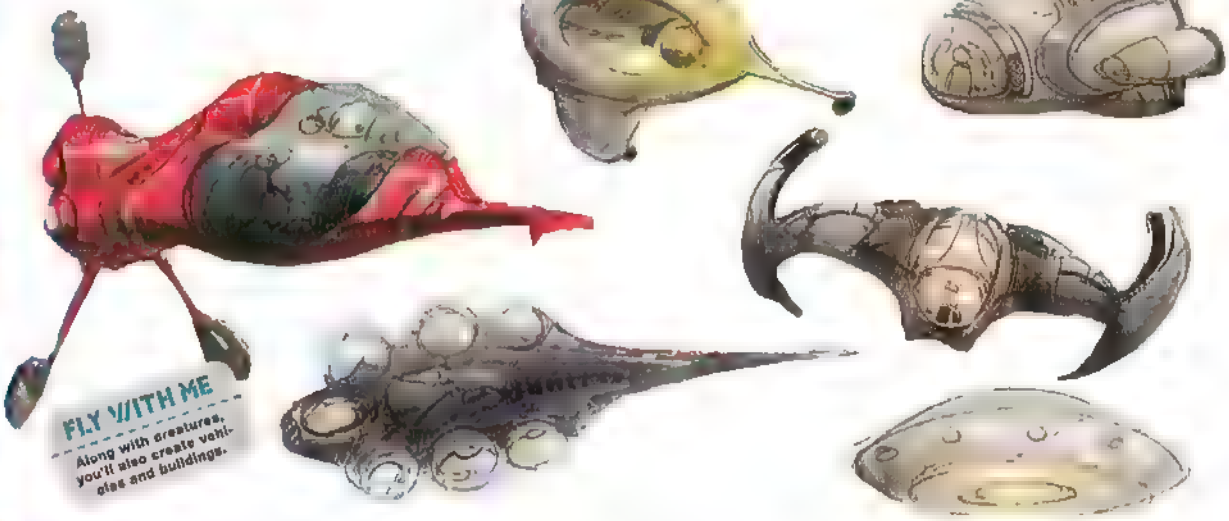
▲ Me, stressed? *Spore* exec producer Lucy Bradshaw.

▲ *Spore's* creature team explains the fun (and difficulties) of animating the unknown.

Will Wright prepares to ship another team member off into outer space.

TO INFINITY... AND BEYOND

Massively single-player gaming



FLY WITH ME Along with creatures, you'll also create vehicles and buildings.

WHILE *SPORE* GIVES GAMERS something huge right out of the box, the scope is nothing compared to what it will be once you connect *Spore* to the Internet. One of the design team's biggest challenges: successfully incorporating player content into an online-enabled universe.

The whole uploading and downloading process happens dynamically—the game automatically uploads your creations to the *Spore* server. Because each piece of content is essentially just the DNA code for the object, each file is only around 2-3K in size—compare that to the size of a downloadable *Sims 2* character, which can easily balloon to 5-6MB.

Once content packets reach the master *Spore* server, they're sorted and categorized based on topics like object type, coolness level, and aesthetic style. The next time your *Spore* game needs a fresh piece of content, it makes a request to the server based on the type of content you need. It's always looking for the best fit, so you needn't worry about getting something that throws off the balance of your universe. Wright tells us, "Higher-level creatures or races won't be downloaded into your lower-level game. They might pop in for an Easter egg—you might get a UFO fly-by—but we don't want you to get obliterated by some other player's advanced race. It doesn't make sense."

Once a best fit gets found, it's sent back to your PC. What happens next, Wright explains, "Is that the game just adds water, reconstitutes it...and now, as you're walking around the environment, you'll see that new creature. And A.I. is now running the behavior of whatever player created that character. If I made my guys really warlike in the space level and you came to my planet, they're NPCs in your game, but they'll still be warlike because I played them that way."

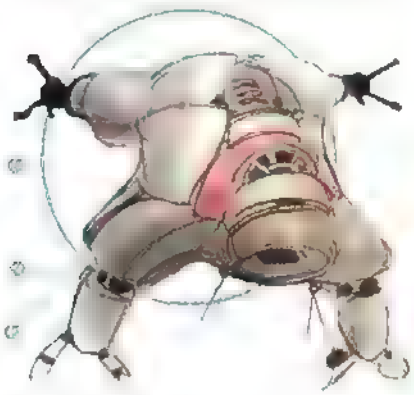
If you don't like the content that was selected, though, you can boot it from the game—and you can report any potentially offensive material. On the flip side, you can bookmark creators you particularly enjoy, and their content gets preference for downloads to your machine.

The team created Sporepedia to store all the content information for players to look at. It's organized into virtual card decks, each showcasing a different kind of content. For every planet that a player encounters, he or she gets a little planet card to go along with it—and with each planet card comes individual cards for all of the content on that planet. Each card (which the team envisions as animated) contains information about who created it, as well as statistics on how the creations have fared in other universes (like how many battles they have won or lost).

Wright envisions Sporepedia possibly existing as a separate card game, too: Players could print these cards out, with rules based off the creature's stats. Voilà—*Spore: The Card Game*. And it has that whole collectibility factor...kind of like *Pokémon*, except with a potentially infinite number of cards.

We asked Wright if he worries about players letting him down like they did with *The Sims Online*—and the answer's no. "Many of the constraints in *The Sims Online* had to do with the constraints of creating an MMO," he explains. "In designing *Spore* as a massively single-player game, we get all the benefits of an MMO without the constraints. This means that players can be the hero or the god, and they never encounter dark planets because someone has logged off. Their experience is enhanced because of the sheer *variety* of creative content that other players have made."

So what's his biggest hope for *Spore* players? He pauses, and then says, "I want it to change their self-perception of how creative they are or can be. And I hope it makes them think about the nature of life and ponder some of the philosophical questions around life."/



"IN *SPORE*, WE GET ALL THE BENEFITS OF AN MMO WITHOUT THE CONSTRAINTS."

-WILL WRIGHT, CHIEF DESIGNER

TAKE IT OFFLINE

For those who don't play well with others

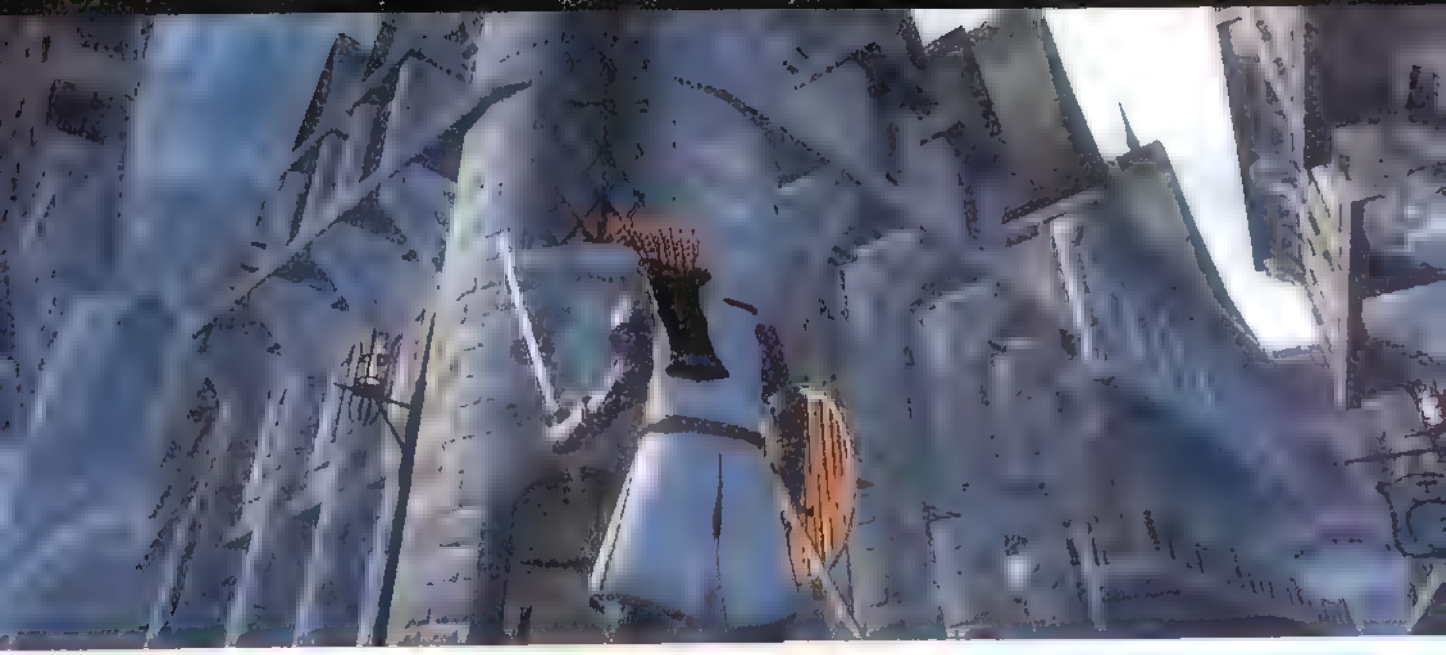
[illegible] whether to download other players' content. So what happens if you don't have online access, or you choose not to download other player-created content? Wright says, "Because these things compress so well, we can store [illegible] 10,000 [illegible] on your local hard drive. So we can give you a huge amount of content even if you're not on the Net. But it's [illegible] because the content [illegible]

>> "I WANT *SPORE* TO CHANGE PLAYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW CREATIVE THEY ARE OR CAN BE."

–WILL WRIGHT, CHIEF DESIGNER

VIEWPOINT

AN INFORMED LOOK AT THE GAMES YOU SHOULD BE PLAYING



SPIRALING INTO OBLIVION

cgwradio.1UP.com) to the game, and whenever

we bestow upon you a jam-packed five-page *Oblivion* review feature, including a postmortem Q&A with Bethesda Softworks executive pro-

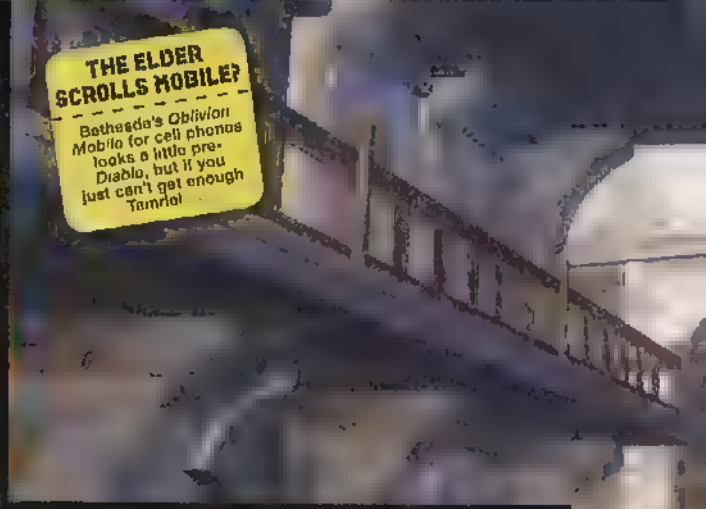
sit back, relax, and check out the definitive word on

REVIEW PHILOSOPHY

EDITORS' CHOICE

CGW's reviews don't concern themselves with scored evaluations; you can find those at 1UP.com well before the magazine arrives in print. Instead, we offer something different: in-depth opinion features that dig deeper into the PC games you're playing via the discussion of relevant topics, including fan reaction, press reception, Internet buzz, and postrelease gameplay evolution. Sure, you can find plenty of reviews and aggregate scores online—but in *CGW*, you get the big picture. A *CGW* Editors' Choice emblem signifies the best in PC gaming.

INSIDE



THE ELDER SCROLLS MOBILE?

Bethesda's *Oblivion Mobile* for cell phones looks a little pre-*Diablo*, but if you just can't get enough Tamriel

▲ These mountains in the distance? You can climb them. Go where you will and do as you like.

THE ELDER SCRO

Don't fence me in

MY GAMBLING BUD AND SPARring pal Rodeirio can't keep his conjugal breeches buttoned. Between wagging dice and bashing noggins in the Imperial Arena, we've been jawing about this "friend" of his, Irene—some "Say hello, good-looking!" pinup. A few peek-a-boo larks to Casa de Irene, and yep, it's evident that Sunday nights are swinging for "Hot Rod." Should I tattle to his wife? Spring them in the act? Bump the creep in his sleep for kicks? Decisions, decisions...so many decisions. They'll have to wait: Someone named Myvryna just slipped me a note about a secret midnight meeting I "can't afford to miss." That's if I can get over to see Raminus Polus at the Arcane University about a mage's guild promotion first. And I still need to pinch some skooma off Shady Sam before sundown. I got it bad for the skooma.

EYES WIDE SHUT

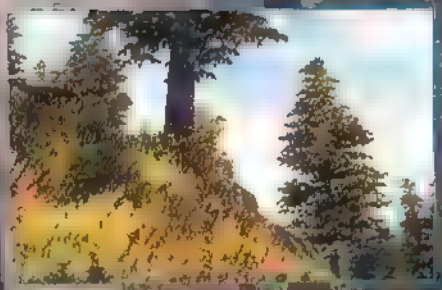
OK, deep breaths. Are we finished screaming like little girls about *Oblivion* yet? Because it's the kind of game that impels some folks to bleat stuff like: "One look at *Oblivion* will shatter your conceptions about what is possible in a videogame." Um, no it won't. It's good, but it's not "Jesus hath returned and the rapture is nigh," all right? You have to keep those traitor eyeballs on a short leash; I'm pretty sure my "conceptions" (like yours) about what might be possible in a videogame were "shattered" decades ago when Jeff Bridges went light-cycling around with Bruce Boxleitner in the film adaptation of *Tron*. Give me the head jack without the muscular atrophy, and maybe that'll set my heart aflutter.

Until then, *Oblivion*'s plenty worth it without the exaltation, essentially what many of us hoped it would be: *Morrowind* with a wider field of view, improved exterior visuals, and semiautonomous, scheduled A.I. You play the mighty hero, again appointed to save the world...or as the Patrick Stewart-voiced Emperor Uriel Septim VII intones, "Close shut the jaws...of Oblivion!" The emperor's assassination at the hands of demoniacal thugs causes crackly hell-gates to the demon dimension (Oblivion) to appear throughout Cyrodiil, the center-continent province where *Oblivion* takes place. Your job? Close 'em up. Not exactly Chekhov, but then again, maybe you'd rather not bother with the main story at all. Let the demons pour forth? Leave Cyrodiil's citizens to fend for themselves? Suit yourself—that's what I did.

EPIC EXTEMPORIZING

Do-what-you-will gameplay in a Tolkien-size fantasy setting reaches at least back to

> THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU ACCEPT *OBLIVION* CORRESPONDS WITH YOUR ABILITY TO ACCEPT A LITTLE LESS FROM A LOT MORE.



[illegible] the 3DMark05 benchmark promised. Nothing, [illegible] fauna like this.

What would an *Elder Scrolls* game be without a few bugs? To its credit, they're few and far between, but when they happen, you'll either laugh or howl.

[illegible] *Morrowind* was [illegible] looking [illegible] 2001, *Oblivion* surpasses "fantastic" [illegible] years [illegible]

LLS IV: OBLIVION

Bethesda's *Arena* (1994), which featured you pick travel to pretty much anywhere and let you similarly ignore the main plot to take up life as a roof-hurdling thief or a greedy dungeon spelunker. But *Arena* traded emergence for expansiveness. See one city, you'd seen them all...and NPCs were ziggy semaphores in search of a brain. *Daggerfall* and *Morrowind* took strides toward fleshing out their milieus, but even *Morrowind*'s singular NPCs amounted to statuesque signposts, and the overwhelmingly homogeneous dialogue trees dashed the sense of immersion that increasingly elastic world-space makes us crave.

Oblivion takes significantly greater pains to remedy *Morrowind*'s deficiencies by seasoning its cities and dungeons with rhetorically sophisticated entities. The short sip of wood elf you meet in Cheydinhal thinks he's the butt end of a conspiracy and wants a tail on his so-called persecutors. So you wait until the wee morning hours, then shadow them around town. Sure enough, they cross paths with your guy (Glarthir) and...are they staring at him? Spying? Or just passing by? When you engage, they explain that Glarthir is a little loco. Do >

The Imperial City sits at the center of Cyrodiil—and the center of your quest. It's almost always visible wherever you're hiking.

you tell Glarthir they're after him, or do you snoop around their houses for incriminating evidence? Whom to believe? It's not that moral ambiguity is new, but your choices here are much more subtle than simplistic "light side/dark side" dialogue. The citizens of Cyrodiil have wants and needs that rub against your reputation, or just next-door-neighbor quarrels that, in practice, lend the atmosphere a wonderfully unsettling aura of uncertainty.

What's more, wherever you go, whatever you see, whoever you talk to, *Oblivion* lets you declare "been there, *didn't* do that" and still feel like you got your money's worth. That's an *Elder Scrolls* trademark: You get lots of stuff to do and don't feel obligated by any of it. Boulder-hop in the wild until your acrobatic skills peak. Linger over a sunset. Hunt deer—or track an Imperial forester doing the same (steal his kill and see what he does). Pull out a few in-game books you've collected and brush up on your Imperial history, or junk out with Cyrodiil's equivalent of a Danielle Steel series. *Oblivion* doesn't handcuff you to clear-me levels or template professions and one-way story threads, but rather unfurls in asymmetric improviso slabs of strata. How deep or horizontally you plumb—that's all about you.

OF OPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Of course, it's fairly easy to expose the seams, particularly if you pay more than passing attention to NPC behavior. When Bethesda demoed its "radiant A.I." at last year's E3, the pitch was that NPCs had not only daily schedules, but "radiating" spheres of initiative, allowing a dynamic ecology of whims and appetites to play, with or without you as witness. While the in-absentia aspect does indeed occur, it turns out to be far less fluid in practice. While NPCs now follow daily schedules and have some limited irregularity, they're still checked by action limiters—in other words, they simply follow more elaborate scripts. Glarthir the wood elf might go left down a path one day and right the next...or sleep in on Mondays, but not Thursdays. But you'll never see Glarthir take up wolf hunting as a hobby and camp in the wilderness for a few weeks, get bored, sell his skinning-knife set, then amble off to pursue new interests (like turning back-alley tricks for cash after you robbed him blind while he was getting his Grizzly Adams on).

Still, it's fascinating to scan message boards and watch players form complex narratives based on the tiniest behavioral nuances, and *Oblivion* is chock-full of gotchas where quest threads align with "Holy crap! I can't believe such-and-such did that!" Everything invites probing—in fact, we'll post the point to which even the dorkiest critics might dissect other games. Fanatic players devote multiple and massive threads to "radiant sightings" across Cyrodiil, ranging from funny bug-related burps to legitimately unpredictable interactions. It's thus a bit like playing in an occasionally sloppy sandbox, and the degree to which you accept *Oblivion* corresponds with your ability to accept a little less from a lot more.>

WHEREVER YOU GO, WHATEVER YOU SEE, WHOEVER YOU TALK TO, *OBLIVION* LETS YOU DECLARE "BEEN THERE, *DIDN'T* DO THAT."

MOD PORN

Is you read this, Bethesda is offering

Oblivion gates begin randomly appearing around Cyrodiil after you complete an early portion of the main quest, and they're (no pun intended) hell to close.

An *Oblivion* Postmortem Interview with Executive Producer Todd Howard

INTERVIEW

CGW: With the many visual advances in *Oblivion*'s engine, character animation seems to have changed the least; arguably, it still looks a bit stiff. Several gamers prefer to play in third person for motion-sickness reasons, but we're wondering about that perspective's purpose here. Is it a viable POV from which to play the game?

Todd Howard: Yes and no. We really designed the game [toward] first person. We like to do third person also, because in this kind of game it's great to see your character and how he looks. But combat, magic, or interacting with the world is really tweaked for first person. I think third person only works well when you're just running through the world.

CGW: *Oblivion*'s A.I. is a notable step forward. Can you offer any especially interesting anecdotes from the testing phase?

TH: Poisoned apples are still my favorite. If you steal food and replace it with poisoned apples, people will eat them and fall over dead. It looks great, and you feel so sneaky and evil. I also like the little things we added late, like how NPCs who run stores will keep an eye on you as you browse, or how those who like you will walk up and take back items you have stolen from them instead of calling for guards.

CGW: The introduction of more sophisticated behavioral permutations simultaneously increases the number of potential breaking points—pathfinding A.I. still has serious issues, NPC friendly fire can cause characters to attack each other inappropriately, and so on. In what ways does that disappoint you?

TH: I agree. Once NPCs start doing really smart things, the problems really stand out. [NPCs] are actually pretty smart about not shooting each other, but once the arrow is in the air, the other guy doesn't know not to step in front of it, so little things like that creep in. We also had some pretty advanced "check dead bodies" behavior that we had to limit to just guards late in the project because it was causing the NPCs to do things we didn't really like.

CGW: You have to listen to gamers clamor endlessly for this and that in a patch or an expansion, so take a moment to tell us what you might want savvy modders to do for you. What's inevitable? What mods do you hope to see?

TH: People have done some really great stuff so far. I really like some of the deeper things, like adjusting the menus or adding a distant landscape. But the thing I'm really waiting for is for someone to go nuts with the A.I. It really is crazy powerful, and once you get the hang of how it works, you can make the NPCs really do some cool things. I hope everyone checks out the wiki we have for the Construction Set at cs.elderscrolls.com.

CGW: Music, maybe just behind sound design, gets the least attention in games today. And yet, it's hugely important in establishing theme and place—in terms of Jeremy Soule's score and sound design, with immersive effects as simple as wind whistling or the way armor types make unique sounds to accompany the physical changes. What's in store for expansions? Extended score? Sound mods?

TH: Jeremy did an awesome job. I think *Oblivion* is his best work, and we're going to work with him more. No firm plans yet to talk about, though.

CGW: *Oblivion* uses a symmetric creature difficulty and scaling system to spawn level-appropriate creatures and provide a constant challenge to wandering players. Conversely, that also reduces the immersive character of the environments by shining a big spotlight on the spawn system. Did you ever consider something along the lines of *World of WarCraft*, where difficulty ramps according to area...or even something more sophisticated, like a "radiant creature ecology" to allow more dynamic and "realistic" spawning of creatures with more sophisticated behavioral attributes, as opposed to just attack or run?

TH: The system we went with works best, which is, as you raise levels, you see harder creatures. We really strive for the "do whatever you want" feel, so we don't know if you're level 1 or level 50 when you join the fighters' guild, and we need to keep it interesting for all levels, and the way we did it really works great. You still find creatures and such far below your level as you rise, but you're also always running into something that can kill you.

CGW: *Oblivion*'s rife with homage to genre traditions, such as the Hackdirt mission's Lovecraftian *Cthulhu* references (the "Deep Ones"). How do you go about voting elements like genre nods in or out, and can you give us a sense of how full the world is with deliberate references as opposed to coincidental ones?

TH: I would say we're a fan of genre traditions. We don't shy away from them, and I think the players like them, too. But we always strive to keep it consistent and never wink at the camera.

CGW: We found two couples who are apparently having extramarital affairs. How many such secret personal narratives have you hidden in *Oblivion*?

TH: There are a bunch of others. I really like Owyn's daughter outside the Arena who's training to join. Good little side story.

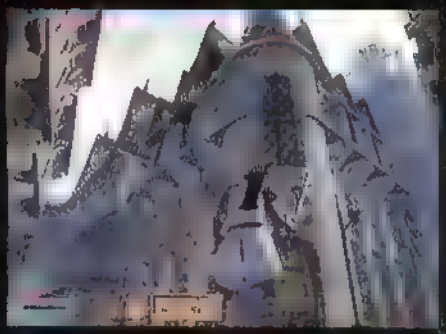
CGW: Any other secret stuff so secret that it still hasn't appeared online?

TH: A ton. An absolute mountain that people have yet to uncover. Oh, I guess I really discuss.

CGW: While we can understand the need to be sensitive to social issues involving the portrayal and treatment of children in free-form environments, it seems very strange not to see children in *Oblivion* at all...

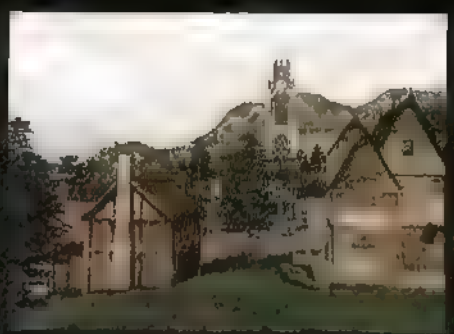
TH: That's something we're dealing with right now in *Fallout 3*. So we'll see how that issue turns out.

> "ONCE NPCS START DOING SMART THINGS, THE [PROBLEMS] REALLY STAND OUT" —TODD HOWARD, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



Play in first or third person, but you'll find first person far more practical (if not outright necessary) during combat.

Character expressions and conversations are rich and unique, a vast improvement over *Morrowind*'s repetitive denizens.



These distant hills are actually farther away than they appear, but the blobby low-res textures tend to underwhelm the effect.

MY PC LOOKS LIKE A CONSOLE?

Maybe we had this coming. If you played *Morrowind* on the Xbox, you know just how awkward its PC-ported interface was. This time, the Xbox 360's interface got the nod, and surprisingly, it almost works cross-platform. Hit the Tab key to bring up a simple, easy-to-read screen with your stats, spells, and inventory, plus a pretty 3D "paper doll" vanity view of your hunk o' beefcake. But where the 360 version allows quick tabbing between areas with the left and right triggers, the PC version relies on lots of mouse clicking, since the text is now approximately 40-something-point and spread (for television screens) across multiple tabs with really, really long scroll bars. The whole thing should have been scalable, and if PC gaming isn't exactly on the ebb, it sure is doing its share of capitulating.

Oblivion's combat system operates on the principle: "If you see yourself hit or block, you do." It should especially appeal to FPS fans that hated *Morrowind*'s random dice rolls.

But it's faint criticism of an overall interface that, by and large, functions just fine. Say you really want that good ol' *Knights of the Old Republic* story hand-holding after all. No problem—just follow the pointers on *Oblivion*'s bottom-screen compass (it also shows nearby points of interest, like dungeons and shrines), and it automatically flags whatever you've marked in your journal as your active quest. In a hurry? Engage the quick-travel option, which lets you instantly hop between known locales. Simple, elegant, and user friendly.

FOREST FRENZY

But all right, some of you won't be satisfied unless I linger over how it looks...and yep, it sure is pretty. More than that, *Oblivion* is just plain...Godzilla sized. Short of the occasional *Terra Nova* or *Far Cry*, outdoor horizons in first-person games tend to end in nearsighted walls of fog or pop-in. *Oblivion*'s, on the other hand, fill bona fide miles over rivers, grassy glades, Greco-Roman cities, and dungeons. And those canny folks at Bethesda certainly know how to gobsmack: Your first shot of the breadbasket comes after a character-creation sequence in a claustrophobic dungeon. Pop out of the sewers in the midst of all that woodsy lovin' and—wham!—hello, *National Geographic*.

The tricky part: getting it to run on today's hardware. The trade-off lies in the distant texturing, which makes far-off foothills look blobby and out of focus. Dusk or dawn help mitigate the midday ugly, and you can tweak your .INI file to texture-flex (say good-bye to your framerate), but your best bet's to spend your outdoor time hunkered in timberland or indoors if the "clay" effect bugs you. It never did me, frankly.

HOLD ME DOWN AND LET ME GO

In the final analysis...can you ever really run a final analysis? We're talking about a game so chock-full of expertly melded cross-genre ideas...no maybe about it—your actual mileage *will* vary, period. That's the core of *Oblivion*'s triumph, and it's why you'd better believe that Bethesda has captured the game-design community's full attention. *Oblivion* doesn't hype when it teases: "Who do you want to be today?" / **Matt Peckham**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

***Oblivion* further proves that real "next-gen" potential lies in letting us tell our own stories, our style.**

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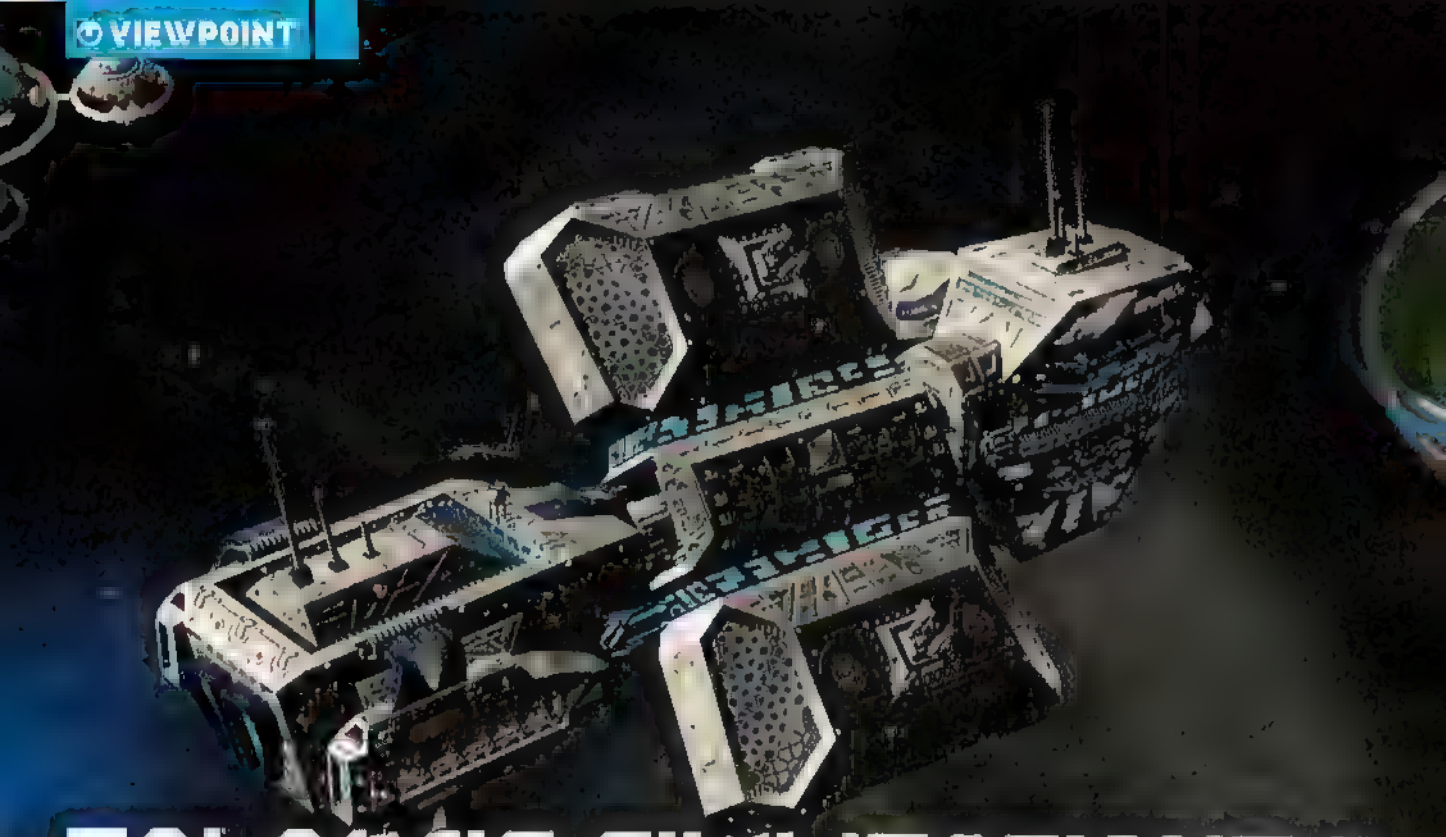


GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: DREAD LORDS

Stardock's Brad Wardell sticks it to "The Man"

75,000 COPIES. That's what the original *Galactic Civilizations* sold from its release in 2003 through the end of 2005. *Galactic Civilizations II* sold 75,000 copies in its first 10 days—impressive for a genre whose signature title, *Master of Orion*, came out 13 years ago. What stands out about developer Stardock's game is its top-notch quality, despite being less feature-rich than *Master of Orion II*—arguably the best 4X space strategy game ever.

Yes, you heard me. Thirteen years later, the basic gameplay's pretty much the same. So, why the *CGW* Editors' Choice award, then? Easy: It doesn't take a supernatural genius to make a great strategy game, and *Galactic Civilizations II* is a great strategy game. I just hope designer and Stardock head honcho Brad Wardell doesn't think himself a supernatural genius. He's pretty bright, though.

Bright enough to release the game without any copy protection. Bright enough to switch to a 3D engine that looks much better than the previous *Galactic Civilizations*. Bright enough to tweak planetary improvements so that they show up on a map of the planet, rather than just stacking up as anonymous lines of text in a box. Bright enough to let players design their own ships. And bright enough to know his own limitations.

The most significant of those limitations: the ability to write A.I. Now, the A.I.'s not bad—very far from it. In fact, the absolutely-swear-to-god-not-cheating computer opponent presents a tougher challenge than that in pretty much any strategy game today. But to pull that off, Wardell eschewed some things that fans of this genre love.

MEMOIRS OF A SPACE TRAVELER

Tactical space combat counts among the casualties. In a turn-based galactic strategy game where you colonize planets and research new technologies, you might also expect to have a separate screen

SPACE-SIM BASICS

	MASTER OF ORION II	GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II
Planetary improvements	Yes, by building structures	Yes, by building structures
Multiple victory paths	No, just defeat everyone	Win with tech, win with diplomacy, win with culture, or just blow them all up
Diplomacy	Yes, with simple options	Yes, with more complex options
Custom ship building	Incredibly rich	Pretty sparse and straightforward
Tactical space combat	At the core of the game	No, just automatic resolution
Differential planet colonization	At the core of the game	Maybe with the expansion pack, OK?
Cool alien animals	But of course!	Not so much

for fighting space battles. According to Wardell, "It would only take a few days to whip up [some] tactical combat in *Galactic Civilizations II*. But the A.I. would stink in it, and then players would feel like they had to micromanage every single battle—à la *Master of Orion II*—in order to be effective." Wardell found the concern for strong A.I. and play balance vitally important from the beginning, especially given how loudly players tend to bemoan the state of single-player A.I. in current strategy games. He'd love to do something with *Galactic Civilizations II*'s current planetary maps that would make for more detailed planetary invasions...but as Wardell points out, "Features are easy. Having the A.I. use those features effectively is hard."

What makes Wardell's grasp of space strategy design even more remarkable is how often games in this genre violate a few simple rules. In 1995, Holistic Design's *Emperor of the Fading Suns* introduced gamers to a robust space-fantasy universe, with a wide variety of units and a whole subgame that took place on the planets themselves. A conceptual triumph, but a gaming disaster—the A.I. proved completely incapable of dealing with the wide variety of units and said subgame. Fans of the game got treated to a multiplayer mode that fared much better than the single-player game—all in all, a lame consolation prize.

THE STAR DIARIES

Galactic Civilizations II, however, completely lacks multiplayer capability. Wardell made this decision early on in the development of the first game...and while rumors suggested that multiplayer might show up postrelease, we get no sign of it in the sequel, either. According to Wardell, multiplayer's tough to balance and, consequently, requires a huge investment of time and effort that would have precluded *Galactic Civilizations II* from shipping at its attractive $40 price point.

▲ The tech tree is more explanatory than in the first game, partly due to recent patches.

>> THE ABSOLUTELY-SWEAR-TO-GOD-NOT-CHEATING COMPUTER OPPONENT PRESENTS A TOUGHER CHALLENGE THAN THAT IN PRETTY MUCH ANY STRATEGY GAME TODAY.

Instead, the game includes a scripted campaign consisting of individual scenarios—which, frankly, is pretty underwhelming.

That's not to say Stardock is immune to feature creep. It just happens in the updates. For the expansion due out in fall 2006, Stardock plans to include the following:

1) Espionage agents
2) Research and espionage treaties
3) Nonaggression pacts
4) Asteroid fields and mining
5) Variable planetary environments
6) Racial planetary-atmosphere preferences
7) Redesigned technology tree
8) Galactopedia
9) Terror stars
10) New ship components and hulls

Not an exhaustive list by any means—but you can see some pretty significant gameplay additions. One of the current system's most glaring omissions: the inability to colonize hostile planetary environments. A planet is either habitable or it isn't...quite a departure from the way most such games handle this variable, which is, typically, to give each race an atmosphere preference and allow them to research technology that enables expansion to other atmosphere types. Who can forget *Master of Orion's* Silicoids and their ability to ignore hostile atmospheres? Game mechanics like this add personality without too much complexity, and can serve as a surrogate backstory, thus making the universe seem complete without requiring an excess of knowledge on the player's part.

If one flaw sticks out about the whole *Galactic Civilizations* design, that's it: Despite the obvious effort put into the A.I. personalities, the random events, and the campaign, it all feels a bit generic. Techs like "Laser I" and "Laser II" don't help matters. What saves it: Clean gameplay and a range of decisions that involve numerous trade-offs. Example: Planets have limited improvement slots; you can get more of them by terraforming, but that costs research and time. One more: Advanced weapons are good, but you need to research miniaturization if you hope to get them small enough to fit effectively on a hull. But the real powerhouses in this space

ENCYCLOPEDIA GALACTICA

While *Galactic Civilizations II* doesn't ship with a comprehensive Civilopedia like *Civilization IV*, you can download and install your own quick-reference database from www.kynosarges.de/Galactopedia.html. Christoph Nahr's creation provi— a great source of in-game information—a— —st until Stardock releases its own version in the upcoming expansion pack.

BUILDING STARBASES IS AKIN TO LEVELING UP A CHARACTER IN A SPACE RPG

opera: starbases.

Starbases give the game a personality in a way that perfectly complements the straightforward design. They give planets or ships numerous bonuses depending on their type, and each new module boosts their power in some way, akin to leveling up a character in a space RPG. The way they take on lives of their own makes any design shortcomings seem miniscule. It's the game's real hook—and it works.

FIASCO

Stardock's attitude toward its customers and the availability of updates provides a bizarre side note to the game's release. *Galactic Civilizations II*, like it predecessor, ships without copy protection. If you want to install it on your home machine and laptop, go ahead. If you want to take that laptop on the road and leave the CD at home, feel free. The game comes with a serial number, but it's totally optional and only used to register the game for updates. So far, so good. And the game's sales success suggested it wasn't being hurt by ease of piracy.

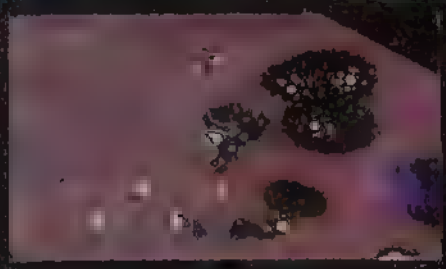
That directly contradicts the business model of companies like StarForce, which operate on the premise that copy protection helps sales by reducing piracy. Still, that doesn't explain why a moderator on the official StarForce forums responded to a thread about the protection-free sales success of *Galactic Civilizations II* with a link to a website that made the game available illegally. It seemed spiteful and petty, effectively illustrating the polarized attitudes in the digital-rights debate. Fortunately, the forum link disappeared after a query from Stardock, and a similar e-mail to the offending download site resulted in the game's removal within hours.

The company's commitment to updates provides a powerful incentive for players to register the game, and the goodwill the company generated with its first release translated into excellent word of mouth that made the game the best-selling software package (across all software—not just PC games) at the Wal-Mart retail chain just weeks after its release. It certainly has the obsessive allure that carries a game to "classic" status—and, wouldn't you know it, Stardock's already considering a *Galactic Civilizations III*. Solving some of the knottiest problems listed above would propel this franchise into the realm of truly great games across all genres.

But, hey...all I really want is multiplayer. You hear me, Wardell?

/ Bruce Geryk

The map looks nice zoomed in...



...and works great when zoomed out.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

The genre hasn't had a game this good in 13 years—which makes the lack of multiplayer so very frustrating. "Maybe next time," says the designer. Yes, maybe next time....

BATTLEFIELD 2: EURO

Booster gold and the 1.21 patch

BATTLEFIELD 2'S DEFINING FEATURES are its biggest burdens: How to add the Apaches and Hinds and MiGs and internal hardware without making the guys on the ground free-point fodder? What to do with sandblasted (Middle East) or fog-sacked (China) acreage to encourage humping from hot spot to hot spot over concealed camping? The provisional solution, at least for the latter, was simple. Back when *BF2* shipped, shot accuracy deteriorated over any real distance, for submachine guns and scoped rifles alike. You'd hear hostile rat-a-tat, stitched loosely and lancing space instead of flesh; you'd see a shooter's fiery short-lived flowers before their seeds struck. To wit, we're talking firefights and not turkey shoots—some back-and-forth and, despite obvious disclaimers, an opportunity to negotiate no-man's-land.

The other problem proved a prickier matter of not only making infantry-versus-armor engagements okey-dokey for either side, but balancing one vehicle against the next. Prior to the present 1.21 patch, for example, Blackhawks were overpowered, plain and simple. By contrast, the Mideast Coalition's beast-of-burden MI-17 chopper was—and remains—a suicide bird and airborne battering ram. Come time to turn an ear to the community and prep the next patch, these problems announce themselves—except solutions are never either/or, never one thing or the other, and always "how much of this in relation to that?" Vectors of near-infinite variability. This is how Blackhawks went from flying point farms to clay pigeons once DICE dialed down the splash damage their chain guns do. And for every community member championing change, you can count on another petitioning to change it back. "The Blackhawk was fine," gripes DarkShot on TotalBF2.com's forums. "All it took to bring down was the combined talent of a couple Humvee gunners. You may as well fly straight into a wall [post the 1.21 patch]." A game's so-called community isn't a chorus; it sings two or more songs. And so it's gone with *Battlefield 2*'s.

FLOTSAM AND JET STREAM

"As with any game, you're going to get a variety of different people who want a variety of different things," confirms official EA community manger Mike Murphy. "We have guys who claim that the M24 [sniper weapon system] doesn't sound the same in-game as it does in real life. Mind you, these are guys who've never heard one fired. Then we have guys—those who the game was designed for—who understand that *BF2* [isn't] a military simulator. So yeah, since we listen to everyone, it's not a matter of deciding who gets heard; it's more a matter of which issues repeatedly surface. If it makes *Battlefield* better overall, and if it's something we can change or add without losing the integrity of the experience, then it may go into a patch."

Which brings us back to 1.21. While the perks of *BF2*'s imprecise fire proved easy to overlook (living doesn't draw attention like dying), its deficiencies were self-evident. Hard-to-hit targets bounced, bounded, and dolphin-dived, and explosives—easy-to-abuse grenade launchers and C4 charges—settled what should've been shootouts. Patch 1.21 turns the tide, nerfs the noob tubes and mujahedeen tactics, puts the premium on marksmanship and cover, and crowns support and sniper weapons the new moneymakers. It's meant more unforeseeable farm-buying and a bit of overreacting. Outraged TotalBF2 member Prophet signed on to sputter, "Snipers have become one-shot, one-kill supermen. Thanks, DICE, you pieces of s****!" Joker 5150 shores him up, writing, "Glad some people see this patch for what it is: garbage. Now vote with your wallet by boycotting DICE games and/or expansion packs and buying *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* instead."

In some ways, that's the sound of well-developed habits dying hard. *Battlefield 2* launched last summer, and one year's worth is a lot of seasoning to unlearn. At the same time, when better to bollix our training? Several months later, and suddenly the same old seems a little less

FORCE

tired, SirMarcsAlot, also of TotalBF2, says it best: "Adapt and overcome." As piss-and-moan-provoking as situations where unseen shooters drop me from far afield are, I'm all for stalking and single-handedly pasting unsuspecting squads. Give some to get some. Same song for the newly able antiaircraft sites and the flyboys to whose lives they've given—god forbid—a hint of fairness.

In response to these out-of-proportion pilots who threatened to turn in their wings, player Ashman_Jay writes: "Bunch of whining losers, bugger off. So you can't get your 60:2 kill/death ratios anymore? Such a shame. I mean, the audacity us guys on the ground have to shoot at you l33t pilots." I concur. In fact, with the exception of air-to-air engagements, now overly automated by magic missiles, 1.21 brings *BF2* considerably closer to the rochambeau balance it's set its sights on.

LITTLE CONTENT, LOTTA FUN

How many months after a game goes public is it entitled to a work-in-progress alibi? Balancing acts aside, *BF2* still harbors bugs, and GameSpy critic William Harms intends to dock additional content until DICE addresses problems in *BF2* proper. "Much as I love *Euro Force* (and its budget price)," he writes in GameSpy's review (3.5 out of 5 stars), "at this stage in its life, *Battlefield 2* should be lean, mean, and [bug free]. Its faults should be forgiven no longer." Point taken, but then bona fide bugs are rare and few (one hides your unlockable loadout, the other parses friends as highlighted-in-red foes). Of bigger concern is the "booster pack" as newly minted product category, and the possibility of selling our birthright (read: postrelease bonuses) for a $9.99 mess of maps. And while, in a more immediate sense, *Euro Force* justifies its below-budget price, I wonder whether, over time, such microtransactions will balkanize *BF2*'s server base.

But like Harms, I love *Euro Force*. Versatile in their support of vehicle and (some varieties) of infantry fighting, maps Operation Smoke Screen and Great Wall rank among *BF2*'s best. Burning petrol blows through the former's processing facilities in black sheets, masking antiair operators and mines, and—although the battle belongs to armor and the odd tank-busting aircraft—mobile engineers, special operatives, and AT troopers give ground pounders their comeuppance, guerilla style. When you do want treads or wheels, they're there—no queues—and the power to marshal so much armor curbs stationary attrition (mobile columns devastate opponents who sit still and trade shots).

Great Wall's great in some of the same ways. Snipers roost along its section of the 4,000-mile-long Chinese fortification, often too occupied pointing at one another to pick on the many engineers barricading pinch points below. And armor, assertive in the outlying fields, gets apprehensive within the central compound's walls where it needs tank-infantry teams to mind C4 and mines. If saggy-diaper skies and glum texture work spoil the atmosphere, layoutwise it's a gem. Taraba Quarry, however, is characterless on all counts (neither GameSpy nor GameSpot's *Euro Force* reviews call the spade a spade, but vacated servers and griefing—so often a sign of boredom—say otherwise).

/Shawn Elliott

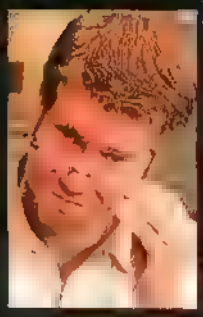
...and don't miss our exclusive DICE interview on pg. 82.

HOW MANY MONTHS AFTER A GAME GOES PUBLIC IS IT ENTITLED TO A W.I.P. ALIBI?

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

1.21 patch: Breathes new, better-balanced life into *Battlefield 2*.
***Euro Force*: Low price, little content, and lots of fun.**

POSTACTION BATTLEFIELD 2 REPORT WITH DICE CREATIVE DIRECTOR LARS GUSTAVSSON



CGW: What would you say have been *Battlefield 2*'s defining challenges? The most difficult and most crucial? We're identifying them as 1) the rochambeau balance between vehicles, 2) making infantry viable against armor, and 3) encouraging dynamic combat and discouraging camping.
Lars Gustavsson: You have a good selection there. One thing that constantly came back to us during balancing was simply to deliver a satisfying experience when you shoot an enemy—whether it's the soldier who takes out the tank or the tank that kills the soldier (whereas a tank sim, for example, focuses on perfecting one side's experience).

CGW: The community seldom speaks with one voice; half wants one thing while the other wants something else. How do you decide who gets heard in terms of what happens with future patches?
LG: While we're often accused of favoring one side or the other, we usually try to listen to everyone. Supporting *BF2* is an ongoing task, since the way people play constantly changes. If we patch one thing to prevent unwanted gameplay, players might invent a new way of playing, and then [another] cheat turns up, and we need to tweak again. As long as people play competitively, the game will continue to evolve.

CGW: At what point in its life cycle is *BF2* at present?
LG: A healthy 9-month-old baby, *BF2* is still on many top-10 sales lists. It's tough to predict precisely where in its life cycle it is, though, since its longevity is very much a community matter. We spent close to two and a half years making it, so I sure hope that people continue to appreciate it for some time to come.

CGW: Would you wager that *BF2* still has a *Desert Combat*–caliber mod in it?
LG: We hope so, as the engine has plenty of potential. And while I don't dare bet on any one mod, I am looking forward to many of them.

CGW: Has modern combat, as opposed to WWII, proved confining in any way? How drastically does the dynamic (for example, air-to-air engagement) change from era to era?
LG: Air-to-ground combat changed completely. *Battlefield Vietnam* had jets, but the new high-tech systems and the increased vehicle speed meant doing things differently with *BF2*. We were also aware that some people would see many of these new systems as "cheating" and not true skill, but overall, it seems as though these weapons and their countermeasures created a welcome "game in the game" experience.

CGW: How successful has the booster pack been? How many more might we see?
LG: We're still following up on results but, at first glance, it's been good. We wanted to make new content—especially more maps—available to the audience at a reasonable price and with an accessible point of purchase. The follow-up, *Armored Fury*, is in development now, but beyond that I can't talk.

CGW: If making maps isn't much of an issue, distributing them to the masses is. Have you entertained the idea of using the EA downloader to distribute player-made maps with patches? Some critics might argue that by making maps difficult to distribute, you're maximizing demand for paid-for content.
LG: We've played with the thought, but you need to learn how to walk before you can run. So, while no promises, we would love to take it one step further.

CGW: How happy are you with the EA downloader?
LG: It's given us a much smoother way to deliver updates and new content to our core audience. It had some issues when we started using it with *BF2: Special Forces*, but EA worked hard to make it solid.

CGW: Has the team considered changing the teamkill punish option and/or artillery? The punish option is often abused, and sometimes it seems as if artillery strikes nonstop.
LG: We're looking at these and will see what we can address in the future.

>> "AS LONG AS PEOPLE CONTINUE TO PLAY COMPETITIVELY, [*BATTLEFIELD* 2] WILL CONTINUE TO EVOLVE."

–LARS GUSTAVSSON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

LINE OF ATTACK

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HARDCORE WAR-GAMING

WAR-BLOGGER! Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's war-gaming blog at gregnards.1UP.com.

TABLE WARS

CGW CHOICE

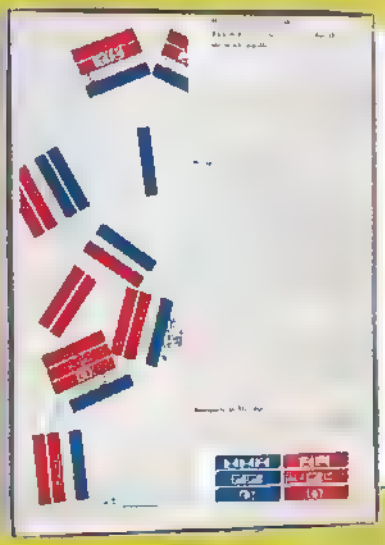
IT'S GOOD TO UNPLUG ONCE in awhile and play a real tabletop game—and this month, I did just that. Longtime readers may recall my obsession with game mechanics and their relationship to a game's aesthetic qualities. Most PC war games lost touch in this area years ago, but designers in the board-game industry continue to pick up the slack. If you remember what it felt like to line up hundreds of little cardboard chits and lose yourself in an imagined historical world (and if you have friends to play with), you absolutely cannot miss Simmons Games' wonderful *Bonaparte at Marengo*, which simulates the pre-Austerlitz French victory over the Austrians in a way tabletop gamers likely haven't seen before.

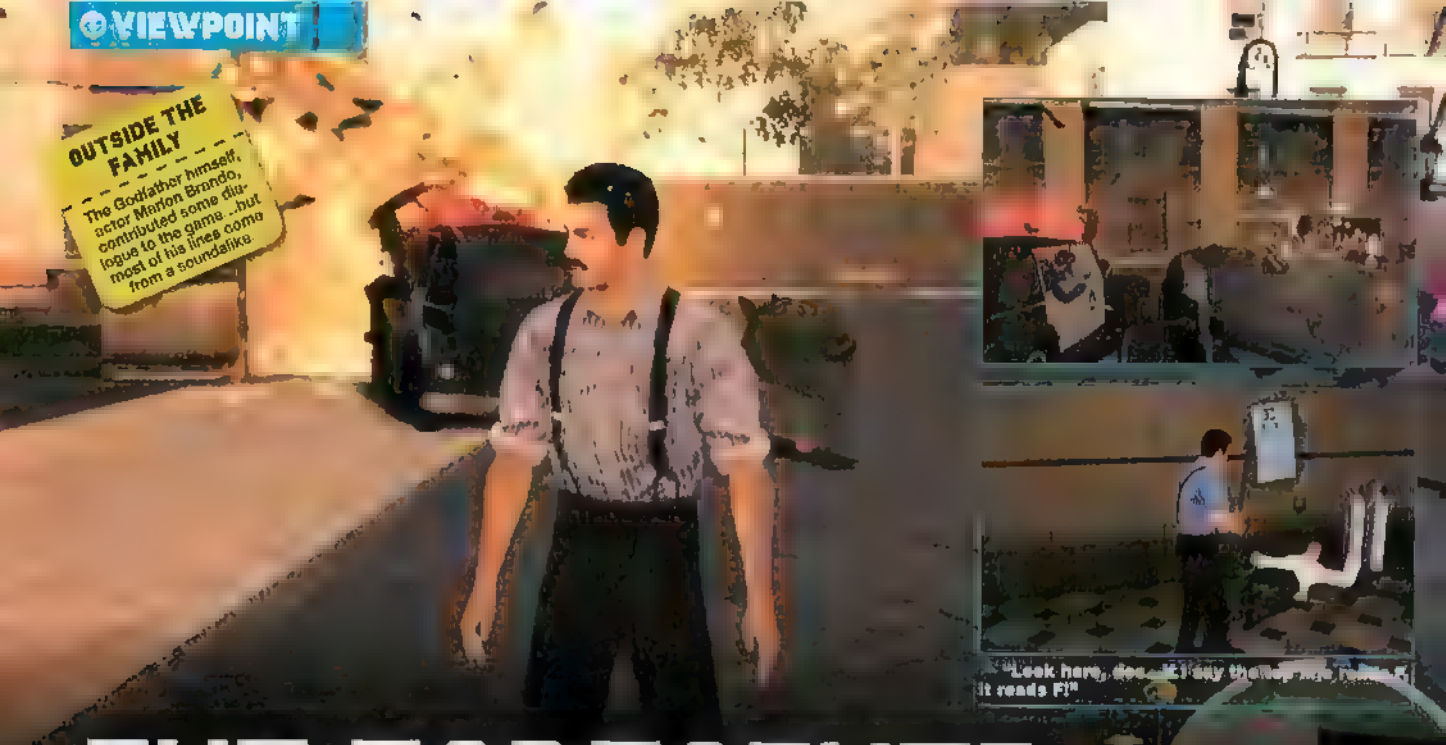
In his notes, designer Bowen Simmons beautifully and succinctly lays out his philosophy of game design: It centers on drawing the player in using the game's look, which he feels is part and parcel of recreating the historical period. *Bonaparte at Marengo* succeeds by using as its motif the old period military maps—which should be instantly familiar to anyone with a fondness for military history. The ingenious mechanics involve units in the form of long colored blocks—with simple, yet clever, positioning rules for ease of play...all while making the game look like an exhibit on the History Channel. Few game designers "get it" as well as Simmons does.

Bonaparte at Marengo plays simply and quickly enough that parents can play it with children who want to learn about history, yet the solid design provides a challenge for even the most experienced players. It's available from the Simmons Games website at www.simmonsgames.com—and while you're there, also check out the excellent *Friedrich*, an elegant game of the Seven Years' War available on the same site, from Simmons' German partner, Histogame. With the current drought of good PC war games, it's surprising how far board games have come. / **Bruce Geryk**

The box illustration, Auguste Raffet's *The Consular Guard at Marengo*, creates the same kind of historical atmosphere as the game itself.

Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk can probably kick your ass at any board game, any day of the week.





OUTSIDE THE FAMILY
The Godfather himself, actor Marlon Brando, contributed some dialogue to the game ...but most of his lines come from a soundalike.

"Look here, dos... It's say the [illegible] it reads F!"

THE GODFATHER

A hundred men with guns

YOU WANT A QUICK SUMMARY OF the gameplay in *The Godfather*? Try this: *Grand Theft Auto: 1945*. Heck, if you didn't know better, you could easily think that it's just another *GTA* mod, because like *GTA* (and the film trilogy that inspired *The Godfather*), this game revels in violence. A good 90 percent of the missions involve little more than beating the cannoli out of someone (usually several people) and then shooting, garroting, bludgeoning, or blowing him (or them) up.

But unlike in *GTA: San Andreas*, for example, the missions here lack a true sense of variety. 1UP.com's initial review describes the core gameplay well: "The extortion mechanic...seems complex and ambitious at first, but soon becomes repetitious." Sure, *The Godfather* features tons of locations (although most of them are cookie-cutter clones of a few archetypes), but how many ways can you beat up the same poor slob butcher or whack the same fedora-clad thug before you go a little Bugsy?

PC users get shafted, too, as the clumsy control scheme caters to console gamers. Just driving around the city frustrates, but using a keyboard and mouse to pull off the beat-em-up-style combos during the extortion minigames borders on impossible. Moreover, *The Godfather* relies on a cumbersome lock-on targeting system for shooting—it's a pointless addition for those of us with mice, and it makes encounters with multiple enemies a real pain. Bottom line: If you don't have a good gamepad, fuggedaboudit.

BLOOD IS A BIG EXPENSE

According to *Forbes* magazine, EA dropped between 20 million and 30 million simoleons on *The Godfather*, much of which went to licensing and celebrity voiceovers. But, as is the case with films, money and actors alone can't make an experience powerful or compelling. It's what the actors work from that really matters, and unfortunately, we get no trace of the brilliance of *Godfather* novelist Mario Puzo, nor of film director Francis Ford Coppola. Again, 1UP.com puts it succinctly: "The main way in which *Godfather* fails is on the story front." For the record, Puzo passed away in 1999, and Coppola refused to take part in the game's production. In a *New York Post* interview, Coppola said: "What [the game designers] do is, they use the characters everyone knows, and they hire those actors to be there and only to introduce very minor characters. And, then for the next hour, they shoot and kill each other...I think it's a misuse of the film [license]."

A scathing assessment, yes, and in this case somewhat undeserved, as the general concept of the game is not without cleverness. The designers elected to create a new, highly customizable character rather than drop players into one of the film's main roles. This allows gamers to observe and participate peripherally in the film's main story line (in a sort of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* way) while having plenty of leeway to do the kind of free roaming that characterizes most *GTA* clones. This system falters as the game goes on, mostly because the manner in which players get involved in such events tends to feel forced or simply absurd. For example, late in the game, the player must "take care of" Sal Tessio once he's exposed as a traitor. Instead of simply fitting him for a pair of concrete wing tips (which is Sal's fate as implied in the film), the player gets ushered into a silly, contrived gun battle.

WHAT IS THAT NONSENSE?

The Tessio encounter typifies the biggest crime this *Godfather* commits: It takes a powerful piece of art, sucks out only the flashiest, bloodiest portions, and crafts them into a largely ephemeral, repetitive piece of entertainment. It's not that *The Godfather* is a bad game in and of itself...just a mediocre one. Such a shame, given the quality of its source material.

/ **Eric Neigher**

GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Not bad for a *Grand Theft Auto* clone... but for the kind of money it cost to make, someone at EA corporate should be sleeping with the fishes.

FALLING PIECES

THE BEST IN CASUAL GAMING

CASUAL CENTRAL

Looking for a good casual game to play? We recommend heading over to PopCap Games at www.popcap.com.

SPACE CASE

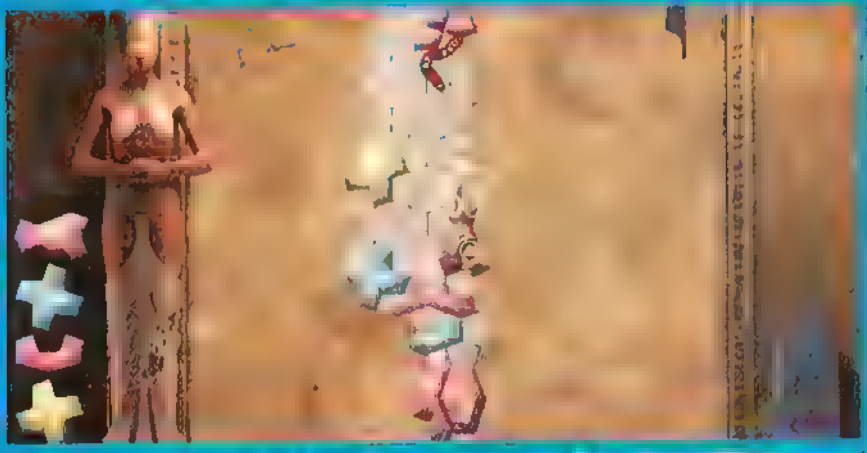
SOMETIMES YOU'D RATHER DODGE professional, personal, and familial responsibility by burning away time doing something other than carving out the word "sinister" from a jumble of letters for the umpteenth time. This month's games eschew word puzzles and match-three play with the challenges of space, be they filling it or moving through it. These games have something else in common—like most casual games. They're best played with all sound and music options shut off and a Dresden Dolls CD providing the soundtrack.

Mosaic: Tomb of Mystery (www.reflexive.net) is the more accessible of the two. It features some ancient murder-mystery claptrap, but realistically, we get about as much story here as in a *Girls Gone Wild* video. This is a jigsaw puzzler, with irregularly shaped pieces that steadily fall and pile up on the left of the screen. Don't bother with the useless Relaxed mode—skip to the far more addictive Challenge play, where you struggle to slap ever-changing pieces into increasingly complex puzzle boards. Assorted power-ups are crucial to finishing the puzzle before your pile of pieces grows too tall and ends the game.

Those who loved Sierra's *The Incredible Machine* back in the day should really dig *Tube Twist* (www.tubetwist.com). It lacks *TIM*'s whimsy but still presents all the essential Rube Goldberg-esque ingredients, including ridiculously complex machines, tons of moving parts, and increasingly baroque layouts. The game's only drawback: the somewhat fussy graphics, which can make it difficult to distinguish similar pieces from each other. Still, the game starts throwing decent challenges at you halfway through the tutorial, with multiple items to guide to different targets within the Habitrail-ish maze you construct. Helpful hints: Don't feel compelled to use every preset piece...and remember that you can hang pieces in thin air. Oh, and don't worry—you're not that stupid. *Tube Twist* just makes you feel that way.

/ Robert Coffey

When he's not spewing hate-filled editorial, CGW alum Robert Coffey spends plenty of free time playing Bejeweled 2.



and lay brilliant solution.

EVERQUEST II: KIN

The sky isn't falling

ABOUT THE ONLY PURPOSE SOE'S *Star Wars Galaxies* served back at launch was to remind me why I never went to MIT. Consequently, when I heard about the game's recent remedial remodel, I scurried to SOE's forums to investigate—and encountered a player base enraged by the changes. Instead of making *SWG* more accessible and *Star Wars*-ish, SOE abruptly ejected a slew of class skills from the game, which oversimplified the experience and ruined many characters. With this as a frame of reference, many players of SOE's other big MMORPG, *EverQuest II*, harbored some serious skepticism about SOE's *EQ2* revamp. While not quite as harrowing as *SWG*'s reboot, it tweaks *EQ2*'s 24 classes to coincide with mechanics introduced in the second expansion, *Kingdom of Sky*. Amazingly enough, *KOS* contains a praiseworthy slew of content, including class-customizing achievement skills extending all the way to the game's new level cap of 70.

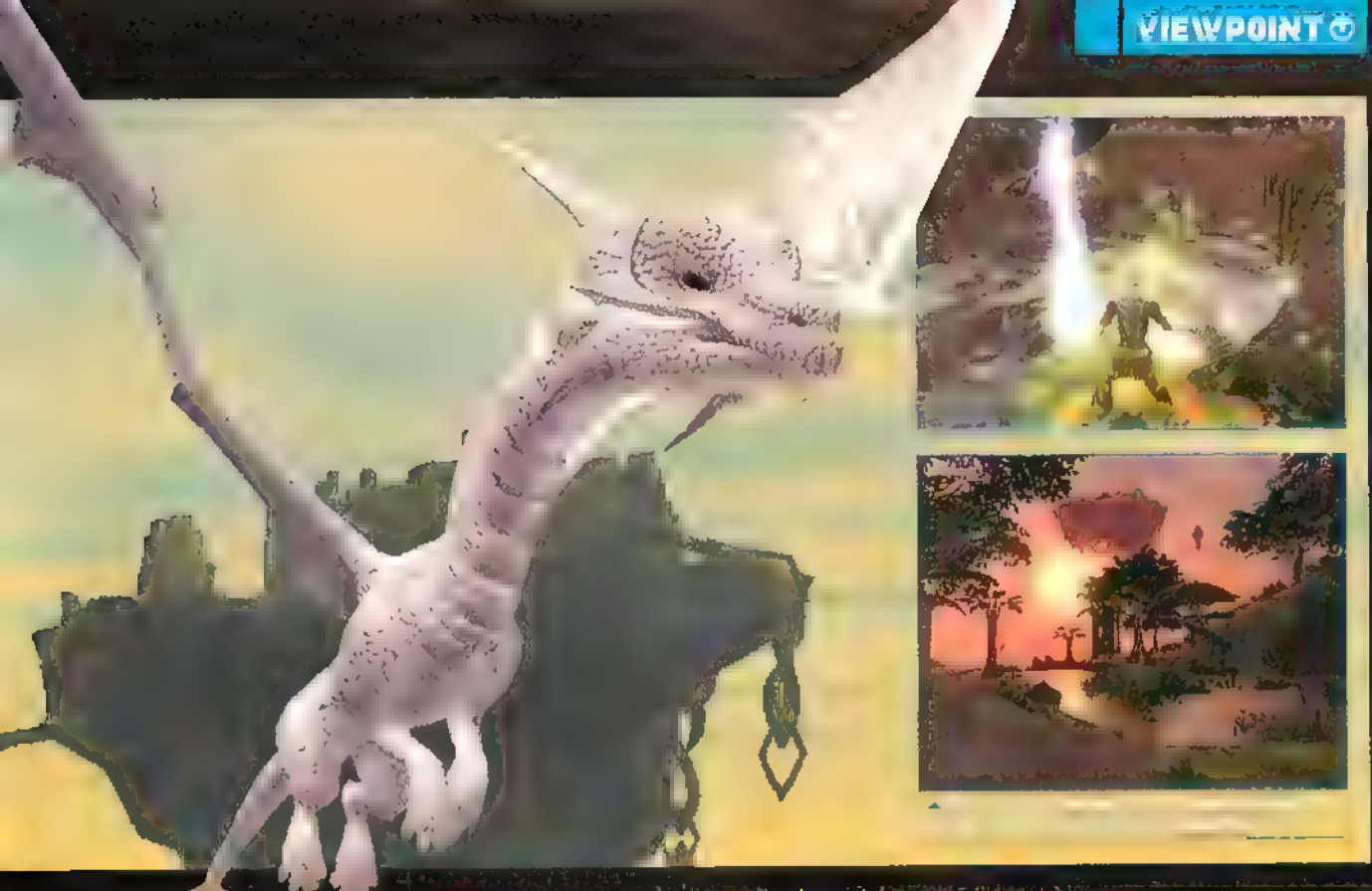
A 70-LEVEL CLASS ACT

KOS' refined class structure gives your avatars more identity straight out of the gate. Characters no longer start from bland beginner archetypes who take 20 levels and two subclasses to morph into a final form—for example, a shadow knight is a shadow knight, and a paladin is a paladin, right from level 1. Shadow knights function as damage-over-time, disease-dealing tanks with life-draining abilities, and paladins heal the team and dish divine damage...all from the minute you set foot in the world.

And it really does seem like a whole new world: All 24 classes, from assassins to defilers to illusionists to wardens, feel much more specialized and satisfying to play, and both of the game's initial training islands sport fresh graphical remodels. These islands feature original quests, loot drops, monsters,

OLD NEWBIES

THIS NEWLY EMERGING *EVERQUEST II* PROVIDES SERIOUS COMPETITION FOR *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*



GDOM OF SKY

and story lines (some much-needed conflict between the cities of Freeport and Qeynos arises...with the emphasis on Freeport's dark side), and you can stick around to adventure and craft items all the way up to level nine. The gameplay's depth doesn't approach that of the original *EverQuest*...but it still beats out other current MMOs in this department, including everyone's favorite 400-pound gorilla, *World of WarCraft*.

In fact, this newly emerging *EverQuest II* provides serious competition for *WOW*. SOE's patches leave *EQ2*'s play experience more leisurely and less tedious: XP debt amounts to little more than an annoyance, as you no longer need to collect your soul shard upon dying. SOE also plans to introduce a much more streamlined crafting system (now requiring less precrafted ingredients) very soon. Plus, the annoying level 5 citizenship quests and the subclass quests at levels 9 and 19 (which prevented you from leveling if you didn't complete them...argh!) bite the dust, too.

Moreover, SOE launched several open PVP servers—complete with their own rule sets—alongside *KOS* (see the sidebar on page 98 for more PVP info), and the new achievement point system resembles not only the original *EQ*'s alternate advancement system but also *WOW*'s talent-point trees.

OVERACHIEVERS

This achievement-point system—probably *Kingdom of Sky*'s most impressive feature—proffers five different paths per class, with five upgradeable items in each path that improve stats like intellect, strength, wisdom, agility, and stamina. Furthermore, depending on your class, these items also bestow boons like new attacks, shields, damage and healing buffs, shape-shifting options, and pets to fight alongside your character.

Achievement points slowly accrue as you discover new maps, complete quests, and kill certain bosses near your level. Higher-level players can also earn points by "rediscovering" older maps...and endgame players can exchange XP for achievement points.

KOS limits your achievement point total to 50, though. Depending on how many times you upgrade certain stats and skills, it's possible to sink 41 of those points into a single path, so you can't earn and maximize

RESPECTING YOUR ELDERS

SOE hasn't messed with post-20 characters much at all, thanks to the focus on [illegible]rly-level revamps. If anything, some actually underwent improvements via other recent patches. My level 3[illegible] wizard (shown on the right, sightseeing on the fringes of *KOS*) lost one older [illegible] spell...but got a stronger fire attack instead. My daughter's fury healer (on the left in her new *KOS* tiger form, which increases melee damage) got a new high-damage spell at level 2[illegible].

every available bonus—instead, the game forces you to focus on specific areas. You can respec your character (at progressively higher financial costs, depending on how many times you do it), allowing for some experimentation. It seems like non-*KOS* owners might have a disadvantage going forward...but shouldn't every new expansion offer things you don't want to live without?

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

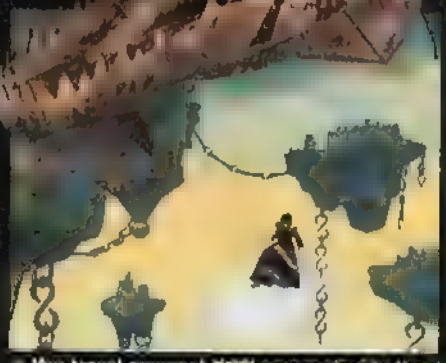
Additionally, for all you overachievers already sitting pretty at the level 60 cap, *Kingdom of Sky* crowns *EQ2* with 10 new levels of insects, flora, and fauna for you to chase. True to the expansion's name, you battle amidst majestic tropical- and Asian-influenced islands in the sky, linked together by floating clouds. Giant portals to these realms are found in easily-accessible lower-level maps like Antonica and the Commonlands, and they also function as quick, easy modes of travel from Qeynos to Freeport and vice versa (making cross-city PVP raids easy). These cloud realms also offer new high-level heritage quests to complete and warring dragon bosses to assault.

But even with plenty of islands in this *Kingdom*'s skies and masses of mobs to fight, the tropical theme gets a bit repetitive after a while. The islands could use more variation in verdancy...even though they're as lush and gorgeous as the rest of *EverQuest II*.

That aside, *KOS* also contains new gear and 10 additional levels of streamlined crafting, as well as four additional PVP arena pets and two new PVP arenas (even though that segment of *EQ2* is largely ignored). The greater class customization provided by the achievement system still stands as the most impressive addition, though—and together with the class revamps for the game's first 20 levels, *Kingdom of Sky* elevates *EverQuest II* to a new plateau. / **Denice Cook**

IN WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

All characters, both pre- and post-*KOS*, live just fine with *EQ2*'s class revamps.



▲ You travel amongst *KOS*' new realms in the sky by riding on clouds.

▲ This *Kingdom* has nasty guardians.

FREEPORT VERSUS QEYNOS

TRUE TO THE EXPANSION'S NAME, YOU BATTLE AMIDST MAJESTIC TROPICAL- AND ASIAN-INFLUENCED ISLANDS IN THE SKY.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Surprise! SOE improves the nuts and bolts of *EverQuest II* without putting the screws to existing players.

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF AN MMORPG ADDICT

THE FINAL FANTASY
Columnist James Mielke also keeps a weekly Final Fantasy XI journal, which you can find online at venadiel.1UP.com.

NONFINAL FANTASY

hath no fury like son

THE UPCOMING FEATURE CHANGES SHOULD PUT SOME GREEN BACK ON TRACK

WHITE WIND

TREASURE CHEST

1UP.com executive editor James Mielke spends every iota of his free time playing online games. He needs help—badly.

TOM vs. BRUCE

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

Let's hunt some orc!

LAST MONTH...
Bruce's Imperial forces crushed Tom's Rebellion in a galaxy far, far away in *Star Wars Empire at War*.

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Electronic Arts LA AVAILABILITY: Retail Box
GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: 1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED: 512MB RAM MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players

EDITOR'S CHOICE CGW

TOM: You know how, when you really like a game, and you play it a lot, you get to a point where you can't play it with your friends because you're too good? I probably hit that point with *Battle for Middle-earth II* about a month before Bruce even installed the game.

BRUCE: The real irony in all this is that Tom hates the *Lord of the Rings* books. He can't even look at a copy of *The Hobbit* without making snide remarks. So of course he's great at the game, and I stink.

TOM: Actually, I haven't read the novelizations of the movies yet. But I liked the movies once I'd played the game. It really helps that publisher Electronic Arts provided the filmmakers with such a rich visual style. And now that Peter Jackson's demonstrated that games can inspire a good movie (or three), maybe someone will make a *StarCraft* or even a *Halo* movie.

BRUCE: Yeah, Tom does actually love himself some hobbit movies, though. He's always saying, "Let's hunt some orc!" into the microphone while we're playing, even though he usually plays the orcs. It's slightly less annoying than the whole "ax mastery" thing he had going in *Guild Wars*. He also likes to ask things like, "Is this in the books?" where "this" is Aragorn or Elrond or something.

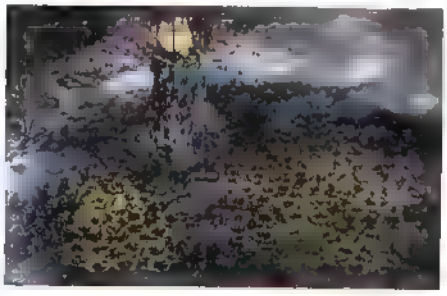
TOM: Okay, here we go. Let's hunt some orc!

BRUCE: We were going to do the grand strategic War of the Ring mode with me as the forces of good and Tom as the forces of evil, but it's just a big mess. Little army flags scattered everywhere, crazy random bonuses stacking up, hidden territories blocked by interface panels, and some god-awful micromanagement as you shuffle everything where you want it. At least it's turn-based, until you finally get into a battle. But Tom knows all kinds of way to twist these battles around so that he has a 10:1 advantage. He promises me we're better off just doing the skirmish mode, where he can only twist his advantage to something in the neighborhood of 7:1.

TOM: The conventional wisdom, which will probably have been addressed in a patch by the time you read this, is that elves are overpowered and Mordor is underpowered. Elves have great archers like Orlando Bloom and whoever that other guy was. But Mordor, which consists largely of CG monsters and extras in elaborate makeup, has no direct counter to archers. What's more, elven archers can upgrade to Silverthorn arrows, which is like inventing the machine gun in World War I. Watching a bunch of orcs try to attack a battalion of Lorien archers with Silverthorn arrows is like reenacting the Battle of Verdun.

I explained this to Bruce in an effort to help him. In fact, after each of our practice games, I studied the replays and gave Bruce some pointers. But between you and me, it's like trying to teach your kid brother how to play chess. He can move the pieces, but otherwise...well, let's just say Bruce is pretty smart when it comes to nonfantasy stuff. Chasing Silverthorn isn't easy. If you try to invest too early in those sorts of expensive upgrades, you leave yourself vulnerable to races that can rush you with swarms of cheap, crappy units.

> TOM'S ALWAYS SAYING, "LET'S HUNT SOME ORC!" INTO THE MICROPHONE, EVEN THOUGH HE USUALLY PLAYS THE ORCS.



Tom gathers at the Ettenmoors signal fire.

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

Tom Chick
In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk
Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years; he loves war games like most people love oxygen.

Like, say, Mordor with its orcs.

BRUCE: Due to my extensive reading of *The Silmarillion*, I know that Silverthorn is actually a book in the *Riftwar Saga* by Raymond E. Feist. But whether we're playing *Lord of the Rings: The Confrontation* or *Betrayal at Krondor*, it doesn't matter. No matter what I do in this game, I'll get a 10-minute lecture from Tom at the end on how what I did was doomed to fail.

TOM: We're playing on Ettenmoors, which is a peat bog where those two-headed giants from *D&D* live. It's a smallish map that consists of broken-up terrain in the middle, where you'll find a signal fire that doubles the recharge rate of your Ring powers if you control it. At the top and bottom of the map are inns where we can recruit cheap troops unique to each race: Molotov-cocktail-flinging Corsairs of Umbar for me, rock-tossing hobbits for Bruce. Personally, I think I'm getting the better deal at the inns.

BRUCE: What kind of battlefield has inns on it where you can recruit soldiers? What are the soldiers doing? Staying at the inn until someone pays them to fight a battle? That whole thing sounds like a *Penny Arcade* comic.

In any case, I have my hands full just trying to figure out which structures to build first. Mallorn tree and then barracks? And then some swordsmen? A hero? But I never have enough gold for that. Who said elves were overpowered, again?

TOM: I know Bruce is going to be too confused to be aggressive, so I can afford to start a solid economy. I leisurely build a few slaughterhouses and then a couple of lumberyards before even bothering with an orc cave.

BRUCE: I see some neutral goblins defending that signal fire in the middle of the map. I wait for a second battalion of elvish dudes so I can clean them up and get some experience, like you're supposed to do in *WarCraft III*. High-level guys are supposed to be so good, but somehow Tom eventually just kills them anyway.

TOM: After the game, I'll explain to Bruce how you don't get much experience from goblins. Also, I'll explain that he shouldn't rush to get the signal fire, because the early Ring powers aren't worth risking a battle before you're ready. What is worth having early: an inn, so you can get cheap units when it matters the most. So I send my first batch of orcs to go take the Inn to the south, where I will muster up some Corsairs of Umbar. Umbar, of course, is the place from *D&D* where Umbar Hulks are from. Let's hunt some orc!

BRUCE: Glorfindel is the cheapest elf hero. Actually, Arwen's cheaper, so I should say Glorfindel is the cheapest nonuseless elf hero. So I grab him and send a party south to level up against a cave-troll lair. According to Tom, some of these elf heroes can take on entire armies by themselves if they get to a sufficient level. It's elf-leveling time.

TOM: After the game, I'll explain to Bruce that it's mainly Thranduil and Orlando Bloom who can take on entire armies by themselves. I wonder if they're in the books. But even your shield-grinding, mumakil-snout-surfing Orlando Blooms can only get you so far.

Tom's nazgul terrorize some elves.

While I'm grabbing the inn, I move another handful of units towards the signal fire. Time to put a little pressure on Bruce. My orcs show up and I drop some tainted ground underneath them to improve their stats. Nothing like a patch of gray dirt under an orc's boots to inspire him!

BRUCE: One thing I've learned from losing repeatedly at this game is that you should never fight on tainted ground. But even with that sage advice, I only have two battalions there and the battle goes ill. Did I really just say that?

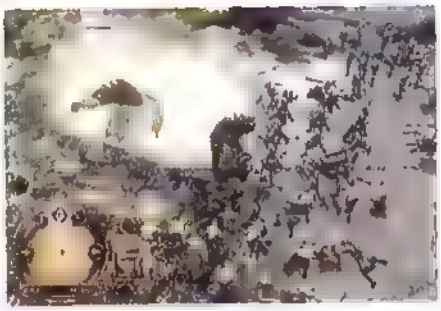
TOM: Bruce retreats. That was easy. I'm on my way to having three orc caves spitting out cheap warriors and archers. Let's hunt some orc!

BRUCE: You can't really say you got the elves going until you build an Eregion Forge and research a bunch of things, like fey singing and woodcraft and these Silverthorn arrows Tom says I really must have. So I build one, even though it's going to be a long time before I can get any of the big upgrades out. Maybe I should just build an Entmoot? I'm so confused.

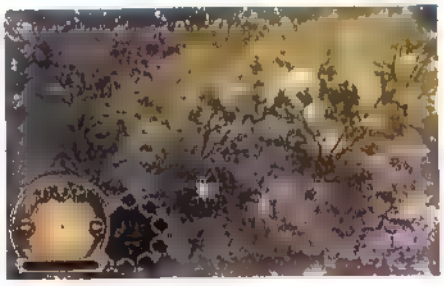
TOM: I'll have to explain to Bruce after the game that he shouldn't build a forge so early. From mid-map, I move everyone forward to see if Bruce has any nearby mallorn trees I can knock over.

BRUCE: Tom moves a huge force straight at my base. I counter with lancers, archers, and swordsmen, along with Glorfindel. I throw my heroic horn power into the mix because I really have no idea what to do otherwise. Somehow, I don't lose.

TOM: Actually, I pulled back after knocking over a single tree. I got what I came for. Meanwhile, my inn-grabbers explore around the south end of the map to see if Bruce is trying to expand down here. We can't have Bruce's magic trees encroaching on my inn. Let's hunt some orc!



They've got a cave troll. Or two.



Tainted ground ain't pretty...but orcs sure do love it.

Elves in the mist.

▲ Incoming cavalry...

▲ ...and contact.

BRUCE: I see Tom trying to sneak some forces down around the perimeter to the south. I run him down with a charge of Rivendell lancers who just annihilate his guys. Cavalry's great for riding down archers...that's something *The Lord of the Rings* learned from Napoleon.

TOM: Okay, now I'm mad. Not really, but it's probably the closest I'll come. I've been saving up to bring out all three of my nazgul at once. Since heroes build simultaneously, this makes a lot of sense rather than trickling them out one at a time so Bruce can pick them off with his archers. So I move my entire army (now with nazgul and the Mouth of Sauron for good measure) south to crush Bruce's Rivendell lancers.

BRUCE: I win. I end up chasing the Mouth of Sauron back the way he came. My guys are laughing and trash-talking while they do it.

TOM: Okay, I wasn't really mad before, but I kind of am now. I'm not exactly sure what happened there. The battle was much bigger than I expected—and then, suddenly, most of my units were dead and most of Bruce's units were dead, but Bruce had a handful more survivors than me. Luckily, orcs are cheap and my three caves continue to churn out reinforcements. I'm also in the process of building two troll cages for some serious muscle to go with all the expendable orc meat.

BRUCE: My lancers are too far away to chase down Sauron's fleeing PR guy, but I finally find them and send them to the middle of the map to see what kind of fell creatures besmirch the hallowed halls of Ithilien-yadda-yadda. Except I'm shocked out of my roleplaying speak pretty fast when it turns out Tom has a whole second army hanging out there.

TOM: By the way, the Mouth of Sauron wasn't even in the regular movies. And when he appeared in the special supergeek version of the movies, he wasn't that impressive. In fact, someone killed him with a single sword swipe just because he was annoying. But in this game, he just sent a bunch of elven cavalry packing with his "doubt" special ability. As they say in Middle-earth, the Mouth is mightier than the sword. The Eye is pretty badass, too. Not so sure about the Nose and Ears.

BRUCE: Someone forgot to tell EA—and, by extension, Peter Jackson—that the Mouth of Sauron is a herald and ambassador and may not be assailed. Since he has diplomatic immunity, it's pretty much out of bounds to be using special hero powers on anybody. Hero powers are something I can't really grasp in this game. They feel all *WarCraft III* with their micromanagement and needing to click on the button at just the right time. But I'd trade all of that for a game-speed slider.

TOM: This time, I have two trolls to take care of Bruce's annoying lancers. Once I get my tainted land power recharged (thank you, signal fire!), I move forward.

BRUCE: As Tom moves into my territory, I counterattack with a Rivendell lancer charge followed by a general retreat to pull him into my mysterious elven fog. Then I unleash the elves. Hey, it probably sounds fearsome to some orcs.

TOM: Bruce uses enshrouding mist to counteract my tainted land. Good move, but I'm not sure how he knew to do that, since I don't recall explaining it to him in any of our postgame debriefings. Bruce finally pulls back under cover of a battle tower's Silverthorn arrows. I've lost most of my troops, but so has Bruce. Mine are a lot cheaper to replace, though.

BRUCE: I'm not sure I follow the calculus here. I beat back Tom's attack through my superior strategy and inflict upon him grievous losses, but he actually wins because he can easily replace everybody in two minutes, while I have to mortgage my fortress just to get some reinforcements. Explain to me how the elves are overpowered, again?

TOM: I'm upgrading a troll cage to build attack trolls, which should put an end to the back-and-forth. These guys are tough, heavily armored, and don't take any guff—and they'll take up the slack for my weaker units. I also bring in the Witch-king and tell him to get off that fell beast he flew in on, because that thing just attracts arrow fire. Yeah, I know it looks cool to have your own personal dragon, but I'm going to make the dude walk.

BRUCE: I finally get Elrond out. Glorfindel is level 5, and I also have three archer battalions (one at level 5), two lancer battalions (one at level 4), and a bunch of experienced but depleted Lorien warriors who are reinforcing around a Mirror of Galadriel. None of this will make a bit of difference.

TOM: My new Witch-king steps forward; this pulls in Bruce's army. We get another round of "enshrouding mist" vs. "tainted land," and in the ensuing donnybrook, I earn enough Ring points for "awaken wyrm," which gives me a fire-breathing snake.

BRUCE: Tom's got an attack troll. Well, three attack trolls. This part of the game is the same every time we play: Tom charges me with a huge army of dudes, and then this sandworm licensed from the *Dune* movies shows up and destroys all my buildings. Wait...EA made a *Dune* computer game once, too, right? I guess that's what marketers call "cross-pollination." It still doesn't seem very Tolkien-y, though.

TOM: The wyrm kills Bruce's archers. The attack trolls turn aside his lancers and knock down the battle tower...and then the fortress. I mop up with the attack trolls and start working on a debriefing to explain that Bruce should have built more magical elf trees, he shouldn't have wasted so much money on a forge so quickly, and he should have used his lancers to raid my slaughterhouses. It's a tough job trying to make Bruce Geryk a good *BFME2* player, but somebody's got to do it.

Tom's orcs crush Bruce's wimpy elf army. Let's hunt some orc!

▲ The Mouth of Sauron is backed by the power of attack trolls.

▲ Soon, Tom will knock all this stuff over.

REALITY CHECK

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO WHAT WE SAY—AND WHAT THEY SAY—ABOUT THE LATEST IN PC GAMING

BLAZING ANGELS: SQUADRONS OF WWII

We say: "*Blazing Angels* is a lot of fun, but it's kept down by a lot of irritating levels. Hopefully, for the sequel, we'll see an improvement in the mission types that aren't just dogfighting."
—Patrick Joynt, 1UP.com (6/10)

They say: "There's enough action here to satisfy you if you know you're in the market for your basic WWII flight-combat game, but it's also very standard."
—GameSpot (6.9/10)

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE: STORMREACH

We say: "Unfortunately, Turbine overlooked the more important party in the whole party equation: the group of friends coming together to do that adventuring. Those *D&D* parties came together organically—the ones in *D&D Online* come together almost solely for convenience."
—Robert Geffey, 1UP.com (6.5/10)

They say: "I think the game is going to be great—it's just not there now."
—GameSpy (3/5)

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

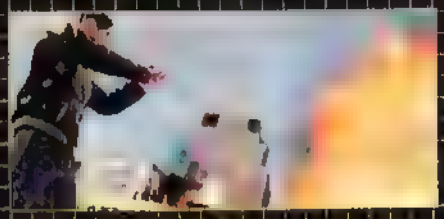
We say: "*Oblivion* is easily the most open-ended RPG to date. It lacks the out-of-the-box crippling technical issues of every other *Elder Scrolls* game, looks great, and delivers on every promise Bethesda made during its development."
—Patrick Joynt, 1UP.com (9/10)

They say: "*Oblivion* is a brilliant game, a bit streamlined and easier to get into, but even deeper and richer than *Morrowind*."
—GameSpy (4/5)

EVERQUEST II: KINGDOM OF SKY

We say: "The *KOS* expansion raises the level cap to 70, [and gives] players a slew of new heroic dragons, insect-voice, and beasts to chase. It also offers unique gear, four new PVP arena pets, and a new attribute-point system."
—Denice Cook, 1UP.com (9/10)

They say: "Again, Sony seems to have focused this expansion almost exclusively on the hardcore players at the top of the pyramid."
—IGN (7.7/10)



TRUE CRIME: NEW YORK CITY

We say: "The visuals are indeed 'stupid fresh' and the overall mission designs will make most people go bananas. But the seemingly countless number of exacerbating problems prevents it from being a robustly entertaining game, and it sadly remains in the shadow of its bigger-name brethren."
—Richard Li, 1UP.com (6/10)

They say: "The PC port feels very sloppy overall, almost as if Aspyr simply got it working and then left it at that."
—GR (6.5/10)

THE GODFATHER

We say: "Even with the voice talents of Robert Duvall and James Caan, the story never gets any good, especially since Jimmy Caan's Sonny doesn't ever say anything beyond the most basic thuggish babble."
—Kathleen Sanders, 1UP.com (7/10)

They say: "If you're a fan of the film, you'll appreciate the way the game pays tribute to the movie. Even if you've never seen the film, the satisfying combat and challenging missions make this game worth playing."
—GameSpot (8.1/10)

SCORECARD

Names in blue indicate *CGW* Editors' Choice games.

Game	Released	1UP Network	GameSpot	GameSpy	IGN
Battlefield 2: Euro Force	March 2006	—	7.7/10	3.5/5	—
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	March 2006	6/10	6.9/10	—	6.8/10
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach	Feb 2006	8.5/10	7.5/10	3/5	7.5/10
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	March 2006	9/10	9.3/10	4/5	9.3/10
EverQuest II: Kingdom of Sky	Feb 2006	9/10	7.6/10	—	7.7/10
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	April 2006	—	7.3/10	—	8.2/10
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	Feb 2006	9/10	9/10	4.5/5	8.7/10
The Godfather	March 2006	7/10	8.1/10	3.5/5	7.9/10
Space Rangers 2	March 2006	—	—	4.5/5	8/10
True Crime: New York City	March 2006	6/10	5.2/10	2.5/5	6.5/10

[Now it's time to check the 1UP Net Score]

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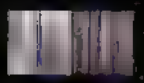

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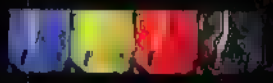

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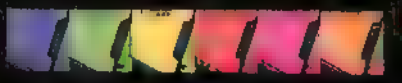

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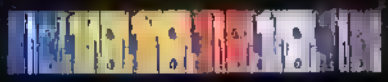

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GRAPHICS CARDS 101

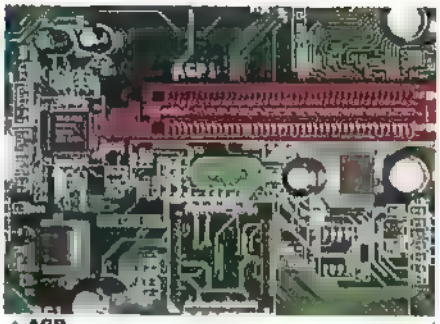
"SO...WHICH GRAPHICS CARD SHOULD I buy?" After countless years—and countless e-mails—this question never, ever gets old. OK, maybe a little. Hey, we can't blame you for being confused. Technology jumps mean that every three months this magazine winds up declaring a new king of the graphical hill. You can't help but feel buyer's remorse after dropping $500-plus on a new, top-of-the-line card only to find out that it's old news by the time you've installed it. Those days of confusion are now over. Well, at least until the next generation of graphics cards comes out. Ready to make sense of 3D cards and become instant experts? Class is in session, kids.

LESSON 1:

No matter how many numbers, pixel pipelines, and quad-card solutions that manufacturers try to sell you, one inevitable truth persists: No one graphics card works for everyone.

LESSON 2:

As pretty as screenshots may look, no GPU (graphics processing unit...as if you didn't know) in the world will faithfully render photo-realistic scenes any time soon.



▲ AGP


▲ PCIe

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA

CGW AND EXTREME TECH BREAK DOWN EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Q: So, whatcha got under the hood?

A: Before we even begin this little adventure in upgrading, you need to know whether your computer sports an AGP (Advanced Graphics Port) or PCIe (PCI Express) graphics-card slot. Older machines that are still gameworthy are likely using AGP, while PCIe is the way of the foreseeable future. All the high-end graphics cards you crave use the later technology. Not sure which you have? Two quick ways to tell:

1) Right-click on the My Computer icon and select Properties. In the hardware tab, click the Device Manager button. Then, in the Display Adapters area, right-click on your graphics card. Selecting Properties tells you everything you need to know (it'll say, for example, "Location: PCI Slot 1").

2) Or you can just see for yourself in the comparison photos above. After all, you're gonna be getting your hands dirty soon enough. Forget the colors in these images; the easy way to spot the difference is to look at the connectors and end clips that lock the graphics cards into the slots.

Q: What's all this talk about shaders, and why should I care?

A: On the most basic level, shaders dictate what the surface of a 3D object looks like in a game. Yes, these handy little programs deal with everything from light diffusion and texture mapping to reflection, refraction, shadows, and opacity. And don't forget all those cool postprocessing effects like motion blurring and HDR lighting. In a game like *Half-Life 2*, most of the emphasis in detail lies on the surface of the object—not in the number of polygons that make up the model.

Hang on; here's where it gets a little bumpy.

MSI RX1300PRO-TD256E

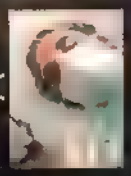
VERDICT: CHEAP

ONLY HAVE $100 IN YOUR POCKET? Then spend it on MSI's RX1300Pro-TD256E graphics card. Blow your cash on anything else this cheap and you're asking for trouble. Sure, that other sub-$100 junkie better than Intel Integrated Graphics built onto motherboards, but you can do a lot better without spending a whole lot more. If you pick up a Radeon X550 or GeForce 7300 GS, prepare for disappointment. Seriously, we warned you. Still, when choosing a card this inexpensive, just expect to dial down the graphical detail in most modern games. This means playing *F.E.A.R.* at a 1024x768 resolution and still only getting 43 frames per second.

WHO IT'S FOR: **2D gamers in denial**
HOW MUCH: **$90**
WEBSITE: **www.msicomputer.com**

INSTANT EXPERT:

How to find the right 3D board for your PC



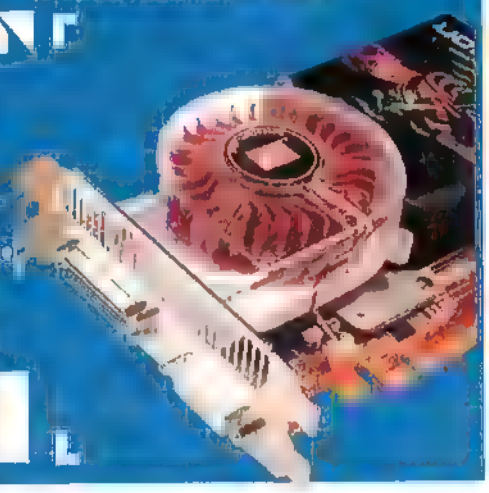
Tech Medics
This month:
Despite the 3D card theme, we still answer your 3D card questions in this month's super-slim Tech Medics.

EXTREME TECH

ATI RADEON X1900 XT

VERDICT: THE KING

MONEY IS NO OBJECT WHEN IT COMES TO games, and at this point value is relative. It's all about pure, unadulterated horsepower. Hands-down the best performance you can currently get ATI's Radeon X1900 XT (yes, the XTX version provides slightly more 3D power, but it ain't worth the price—avoid the XTX like the plague). Overclockers can push the X1900 XT even further, adding 100MHz without breaking a sweat. In fact, next-gen games like *F.E.A.R.* shine the most on ATI's powerhouse card.



WHO IS FOR: **"The Donald" and the hardcore gamers with extra bling**
HOW MUCH: **$520**
WEBSITE: **www.ati.com**

Microsoft's DirectX 9.0c, the 3D application program interface (API) in most current PC games, uses vertex shaders and pixel shaders. Vertex shaders alter geometry while pixel shaders determine a pixel's color value. Today's graphics cards are all DirectX 9.0c compatible.

What you aren't seeing yet: next-gen cards that take advantage of DirectX 10. When DX10 hits the scene—likely with the release of Windows Vista in 2007—with it comes the concept of geometry shaders. Without getting too deep into the technical side of the force, these shaders operate between the vertex and pixel shaders, streamlining procedures. Geometry shaders can output results directly to the memory and into the graphics pipeline without ever needing the CPU. This means more operations happening faster. Some of the first games slated to show off what DX10 can do include *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, *Halo 2*, and possibly EA's *Crysis*.

Q: I'm always seeing graphics cards with more memory at different speeds. Why does that even matter?

With the availability of faster graphics memory (with modern GDDR3 clocking as high as 900MHz), manufacturers pile more RAM than ever onto their cards. Cards bristling with 512MB of memory are commonplace now, and ATI recently announced a card equipped with a staggering 1GB of memory. Granted, that new card is meant for workstations...but we can dream, right? Seriously, though—the era of 1GB graphics cards for gamers ain't far behind. As games make use of higher-resolution textures, 512MB cards will become more useful. In other words, for most games today (aside from a handful like *F.E.A.R.*), 512MB of memory constitutes just a little bit of overkill. On the other hand, if you're itching to ratchet up the antialiasing settings, the extra memory certainly can't hurt.

Q: CrossFire? SLI? Should I even consider dropping big bucks on one of these dual-card graphics solutions?

A: You got a spare $1,100 lying around? The first thing you need to know: If you have a small LCD monitor (19 inches and under), don't waste your money on a dual-card setup. The monitor's low native-resolution settings won't take full advantage of even one high-end graphics card, let alone two. The next thing to keep in mind if you spring for two cards: You need the right motherboard to get the job done. You might wind up building a new PC from scratch.

Between ATI's CrossFire and Nvidia's SLI, which one's better? Both exhibit evenly matched speed on most games and synthetic tests. Nvidia pulled ahead a little, sure, but its GeForce 7900 GTX cards can't render some games with antialiasing and high dynamic range lighting at the same time. Just ask yourself which features you really need in your card.

Q: All right then, so which card should I buy?

A: You want the truth?! You can't handle the...oh, never mind. We don't have a simple answer for you. We could say, "Wait for Vista." With DX10, a completely new set of procedural processing will require a new kind of graphics card that you're probably going to want to buy>

PRO TIPS

HOW TO LOOK LIKE A HARDWARE HERO

- The best cards come out for PCI-Express motherboards first, followed by dumbed-down AGP versions a few months later.
- If your PC is more than 5 years old, it probably has an ancient PCI graphics card slot. That Pentium II-friendly motherboard? Time to put that poor old girl out of her misery.
- Got big boards? Some cards are long or extra thick thanks to cooling units. Make certain that the card you want will actually fit in your PC.
- When you're installing your graphics card, make sure to give it plenty of breathing room. If possible, move other cards away from it to prevent overheating.
- High-end cards hog resources. Is your power supply beefy enough to juice the system and your new monster graphics card?

>> FIND DETAILED REVIEWS AND MORE AT GO.EXTREMETECH.COM/GRAPHICS.

GRAPHICS CARDS

EVGA E-GEFORCE 7600GS WITH PASSIVE HEATSINK

VERDICT: A SURPRISING PERFORMER

NVIDIA'S NEW GEFORCE 7600 SERIES LEADS THE bargain-performance pack. Among this line of 3D cards, we were pleasantly surprised by Evga's e-GeForce 7600GS in particular. Its solid performance and passively cooling system (look, Ma: no fans!) allowed us to coax more out of *Doom 3* than we could with similarly stacked ATI cards. Of course, if you're not psyched for upcoming titles like *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, go on and get a Radeon X1600-based card.

WHO IT'S FOR: Players who want to keep it cool, quiet, and efficient
HOW MUCH: $140
WEBSITE: www.evga.com

FIND MORE DETAILED REVIEWS AND MORE AT EXTREMETECH.COM/GRAPHICS.

anyhow. Ah, but life's never that simple, eh? With that, it's testing time!

TAKE IT TO THE BOARDS

Jason Cross' eyes are still uncrossing after his marathon lab session for ExtremeTech.com. He scrutinized 17 different graphics cards ranging from sub-$80 budget boards up through $550 fire-breathing, superclocked monsters. The result of this exercise: You really do get what you pay for, particularly if you play current-generation games like *Call of Duty 2* or *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

Before we dive into the products, though, let's work through some scenarios you can use to figure out the best upgrade path. A lot depends on the games you play. Are you addicted to *The Sims 2*? You may not need one of those overclocked monstrosities—a midrange card works just fine. So let's run through the key decision points.

First, ask yourself: "What games do I play?"

It used to be simpler: Playing first-person shooters meant getting the beefiest graphics cards possible, while playing anything else meant getting away with lower-cost hardware. That's gotten a little more complex, as games like *Battle for Middle-Earth II* and *Civilization IV* up the graphical ante for strategy titles. Some modern racing games make heavy use of pixel and vertex shaders, too.

It turns out that the vast majority of games today tend to rely more on the CPU. *Half-Life 2* provides a good example. Despite the game's gorgeous visuals, even moderate graphics cards can generate high framerates, but a modest CPU may result in lower performance. Some current-generation titles such as *F.E.A.R.*, *Call of Duty 2*, and *Oblivion* hit your graphics card harder than Barry Bonds hits the steroids—especially if you start turning up the eye candy.

If your games require less-robust graphics, then you probably don't need that $550 overclocked behemoth. A midrange card costing about $200 will do just fine.

The other key piece of advice: Know your system. If you own an aging system that still has an AGP slot, your options become more limited.

Of course, sometimes you simply can't afford a pair of $550 cards. Dropping $1,100 on a pair of high-end graphics cards that then require a beefy CPU and a massive power supply may simply be too frivolous an expense for most of us. In that case, just bite the bullet and turn down some graphical detail options. If it's any consolation, some games still look pretty freakin' impressive on a $200 card if you bump a few key detail sliders down a notch or two.

Ultimately, you want to achieve that Zen of system balance—that state of Nirvana where the CPU and the graphics cards don't hobble each other. An SLI or CrossFire graphics setup running on a 2.66GHz Pentium 4 or Athlon 64 3000+ might not be an optimal balance, since the graphics system will often remain idle, waiting for the CPU to finish some task. By the same token, you shouldn't be surprised if your game performance goes straight to the toilet when you combine a lower-end GeForce 7300 with a powerful Athlon 64 FX-60 CPU.

XFX GEFORCE 7600GT XXX EDITION

VERDICT: A GREAT DEAL!

TWEAKERS SHOULD DIG WHAT XFX DID WITH ITS GEFORCE 7600 [illegible] games [illegible] a little too much when [illegible]

WHO IT'S FOR: Smart shoppers
HOW MUCH: $210
WEBSITE: www.xfxforce.com

THE RIGHT GRAPHICS CARD

The quick answers to all your questions

PROFILE	WHY YOU SHOULD UPGRADE	WHY YOU SHOULDN'T	WHAT YOU SHOULD GET
Older AGP system (early Pentium 4 or Athlon XP); GeForce4 Ti 4200 or Radeon 9500 videocard	To play more current and graphically demanding games (albeit still at low resolutions).	Sorry, but the party's almost over. Save your money up for a new system or a motherboard/processor/memory upgrade plus PCI Express graphics. Your CPU is your limiting factor, not your graphics card.	Pretty limited choices here. High-end cards include the GeForce 7800 GS and ATI Radeon X800 series. Midrange cards include the GeForce 6600 line and the aging Radeon 9600.
Late-generation AGP system (Pentium 4 up to 3.4GHz or Athlon 64 socket 940 or socket 939; Intel 865/875, NForce3, or VIA K8T800 chipset); GeForce4 or Radeon 9500 videocard	To play more current and graphically demanding games. Good upgrade paths include the GeForce 7800 GS and ATI Radeon X800 AGP.	Socket 939 users can easily upgrade to PCI Express with a simple motherboard swap.	See above.
Early-generation PCI Express system (Intel 915/925 or NForce4)	To play more current and graphically demanding games with greater fidelity and at much higher resolutions.	Sorry—Intel users have no path to a dual core.	Lots of choices here, but for best system balance, a good midrange card like the Radeon X1800 GTO or the GeForce 7600 series is a good bet.
Current-generation PCI Express system (ATI CrossFire, Nvidia NForce4 or NForce4 SLI, or Intel 945/955/975)	If your system has dual-graphics-card support, you have the option for SLI or CrossFire.	If you have a relatively modest CPU, consider upgrading that first.	If you want the ultimate in performance, consider SLI or CrossFire twin graphics cards...but also consider system balance.

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech

BIG MAC ATTACK

The possibility of running Windows on a Mac is hardly newsworthy in itself; hackers pulled that off within hours of the first Intel-powered iMac's arrival. The real newsworthy part is Apple's official endorsement of the endeavor with the new Boot Camp software. By releasing official (though hardly final) Windows drivers for Mac hardware, the company gives users its blessing to use something besides its precious OS X.

This twist brings plenty of politics and huge repercussions, but that's a story for another time. The simple question on every game-loving Mac user's mind right now: "Does this finally mean we have access to all those great Windows games we feign indifference to...but secretly covet?" The short answer: Yes. The long answer: Yes, and it totally rocks.

THE INSTALLATION

Configuration is a breeze and—surprise, surprise—works without a hitch. In fact, with a firmware update, you don't even need to use Boot Camp to get Windows XP running on a Mac. Boot Camp just makes the process as Apple-like as possible.

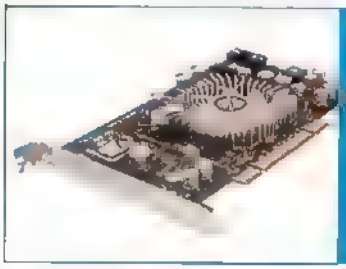
Setup and OS installation come next. Some handy tips: Use FAT32 formatting (which allows OS X to both read and write on the XP partition) and make your partition at least 20GB (you did spring for a 100GB drive or bigger, right?). Oh, and this kind of goes without saying, but make sure that you don't overwrite your OS X partition.

THE GAMES

While our tinkering doesn't exactly constitute a proper lab test, we did put *Half-Life 2* through the paces. Of course, *HL2* on a Mac suffers from the same problems that plague the PC version: interminable load times and sound that occasionally stutters during the transitions from one area to another. Minor issues, really, and totally moot in the face of the far more important consideration here: *Half-Life 2* is playable on a Mac—without any sort of emulation or compromise in quality.

With all settings on medium, *F.E.A.R.* is definitely playable on the MacBook, too. You won't see the silky smooth 60 frames per second that hardware freaks clamor for, but it looks good even with tons of characters onscreen. Annoyingly, *F.E.A.R.* offers a pitiful selection of resolutions, all constrained to the old-fashioned 4:3 aspect ratio. Playing it on the MacBook's widescreen display makes things look just a little too stretched out—it ain't pretty.

We'll be back soon enough with some more definitive tests. For now, though, we can say that the Mac finally represents a viable platform for hardcore gamers, which means nothing but good news for Apple and entertainment-starved Mac-heads alike. /



OVERBOARD

[illegible]

"DUDE, YOU GOT AN ALIENWARE!"

[illegible]

TECH MEDICS

Extreme Tech's Loyd Case says your HMO will cover this

Q: I'm hoping to the sweet mother of GOD that you can fix this problem. When playing new games like *F.E.A.R.* and *Call of Duty 2*, white dots, holes, and tears start to appear. They flash and pop everywhere, making gameplay annoying and impossible at times. PLEASE HELP ME!!!

Corey Wells

A: Please, Corey, ease up on the CAPS LOCK! As for your headache, it sounds like either your graphics card is overheating when playing shader-intensive game like *F.E.A.R.* or your graphics memory is being pushed too hard. You can try underclocking the card using a tool like Rage3D Tweak (http://www.rage3d.com/r3dtweak/)

Q: I have an AMD Athlon 3200+, 512MB of RAM, a 160GB hard drive, and an Nvidia GeForce4. Would upgrading to 1GB of RAM and replacing the videocard with a GeForce 7800 GS allow me to play *The Elder Scrolls IV*?

Josh W.

Q: I love to play games and have a Pentium 4 2.4GHz CPU, 768MB of RAM, 60GB and 30GB hard drives, an Audigy 2 soundcard, and an Nvidia GeForce FX 5500. The main hard drive is starting to make a high-pitched whizzing sound when starting up. Since this PC is three years old, I'm thinking about replacing this. This computer can't run *Oblivion* to save its life. Should I upgrade the videocard or just upgrade the system? I'm thinking about an SLI motherboard with an Athlon 64 X2 3800+ and two GeForce 6600 graphics cards.

Aaron Martin

A: Every few years, a game comes out that makes everyone want to upgrade their PCs. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* certainly fits the bill for this cycle.

An Athlon XP 3200+ is probably a good enough CPU, but a GeForce4 certainly won't cut it. Josh's idea of getting a 7800 GS will probably make *Oblivion* playable on his rig. On the other hand, the 7800 GS costs about $300, and you have to wonder if it might not make more sense to invest in a whole new system. That Athlon XP may run out of gas pretty quickly with newer game titles.

Aaron has a different problem. At a minimum, he needs to replace his hard drive, since it's probably going to fail fairly soon. He's smart to want to go to a dual-core system, but we have to question the choice of two 6600 cards in SLI mode. Figure that a pair of 256MB 6600s cost around $200. For that same $200, you can probably get an XFX GeForce 7600GT XXX Edition, which likely outperforms a pair of 6600s in SLI mode. You can always add a second 7600GT at a later date if you want some extra juice. If you want the whole skinny on price versus performance, check out the big roundup over on ExtremeTech.com.

Got questions? Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com

ON FILEFRONT

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PC DEMOS

FileFront

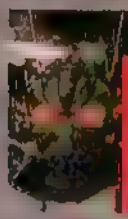
Computer Gaming World has joined forces with FileFront.com to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming editorial and access to the top gaming downloads, including demos, mods, drivers, and more. What does this mean for you? No more waiting for that CD-ROM every month! Of course, if you need a nudge as to what to grab, we'll happily point you in the right direction within these pages. Check out these hot picks from the FileFront editors, then head to cgw.filefront.com to download them!

TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

Legendary treasure hunter Lara Croft returns—and plunges deep into familiar territory. Does she sink or swim? Decide for yourself after you play this demo!

EVOLUTION GT

Put the pedal to the metal in one of five cars across four tracks in any of three different game modes, including a full tutorial narrated by famed racer Gabriele Tarquini.



GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: DREAD LORDS

Play as the humans and test your strength against three alien races in this turn-based strategy game set in a galaxy full of treasures and dangers.

BLAZING ANGELS: SQUADRONS OF WWII

Grab this demo, take to the air, and master the skies as you lead a crack team of pilots across three exciting WWII missions.

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

Enter the creepy and psychotic world of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* with this demo. Be sure to turn off the lights and crank up the speakers on this one!

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION CONSTRUCTION SET

Be sure to grab Bethesda's officially released construction set, which allows you to create your own content for this amazing single-player RPG.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION DON'T CLOSE THE GATES (MOD)

This mod leaves the gates to Oblivion open, allowing you to go back and finish any side quests that you may have missed.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION DIMENSIONAL POCKET V2.4 (MOD)

This mod adds the ability to store a much larger-than-normal assortment of items on your character.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION CURE VAMPIRISM (MOD)

Vampirism stinks—so remember to grab this mod, which adds a potion to cure vampirism and all its effects within the game.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION SIMPLIFIED LEVELING [illegible]

This mod may make things easier for you by automatically increasing your skills as you improve, making leveling up automatic.

MAX PAYNE 2 - 7TH SERPENT: CROSSFIRE (MOD)

Check out this mod for the *Max Payne 2* game engine that thrusts you into a world of corruption, secrecy, and vengeance.

ALEXEY'S DWICE

The latest puzzle game from *Tetris* creator Alexey Pazhitnov has you racing against time to save a village from disaster!

SNOWY: LUNCH RUSH

Think running a restaurant is easy? Serve your customers and try to earn enough cash to upgrade to swankier locations.

AD INDEX

HEY, IS THIS COLUMN LATE?

My GreenSpeak for the January 2003 issue—at last!

WELL, I'M BACK.

Now, depending on who you are, how well you know me, and what your particular worldview is, you may have any or all of the following responses:

1) Wow—is that what that smell is?

2) That's great, but, er, who are you?

3) Man, not *you* again.

For what it's worth, this is pretty much the same series of responses I get from my family when I come home from work every night. Even my 10-pound little dog—a species, so I'm told, that has served for roughly 400,000 years as "man's best friend"—growls at me and chews on my foot the second I walk in the door. Plus there's that big neon "We Hate Jeff" billboard I pass when getting off the freeway each evening, which really just seems like a bit of overkill, if you ask me. I get it already.

Anyway, I'm back. And I gotta tell you, a *lot* has happened since I left this spot three years ago to let Robert Coffey work out his personal psychoses in public here. But as Aesop or Virgil or He-Man or one of those smart old dudes in the white robes from ye olden tymes once said, all good things must come to an end—even *Joey*. So with that in mind, we let the authorities escort Robert back to the offshore federal facility with the rubber walls, muzzles, and 24-hour armed surveillance—where we first interviewed him for his job at *CGW*—and I, your humble squire, have taken back the back page again. Yay!

When I last appeared here, in December 2002, I had just returned from a vacation in Hawaii. And I realized upon returning that I was utterly burned out. Because, you know, when you play games for a living and then try to rest up from *that* kind of drudgery by vacationing in an ugly hellhole like Hawaii—well, who wouldn't be burned out?! No, I decided, while apparently deep in some kind of heatstroke-induced mania, that it would be much less stressful, and much more fun in a kick-back, Hacky Sack, Margaritaville sorta way, to focus on being a manager here at *CGW* instead. Because nothing spells F-U-N more than telling people that they're out of a job, or that their expenses are not approved, or that they can't have that copy of *Oblivion* because I need it and I'm the boss. Oh, wait. No. That last one rocks. Ha, ha!

>> A LOT ABOUT BEING THE BOSS AT *CGW* ROCKS. THIS IS NOT THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT AT THE POULTRY PROCESSING PLANT.

The honest truth, I'm willing to admit, is that a lot about being the boss at *CGW* rocks. I mean, who am I kidding? This is not the graveyard shift at the poultry processing plant. I am getting paid to play, think about, and write about games. At its very worst, how hard could that ever be? Answer: not very. Even if I do have the occasional Dilbert-like managerial headache ("No, Darren, porn DVDs are not expensable as 'research'") or the periodic tough decision to make ("Hmmmm, glazed or chocolate?"), I have come to realize that my life here on the place I like to call Earth is a relatively blessed one, and that I need to embrace, in a no-strings-attached, married-but-curious sort of way, my good fortune. Which is what I am doing now.

And what I am here to tell you today, my friends, the reason I have come back from out of the wilderness, is to share this with you: You don't have it so bad, either. Yes, my PC gaming brethren, we have seen better days for this beloved pastime of ours. Yes, there was a time when you could actually go to a retail store and see rows and rows of PC games for sale. Good ones, even! Not like now, when you have to ask for the back-room key and skulk back, head buried in your trench coat, in a sweaty-palmed search for the latest *Zoo Tycoon* expansion. No, back then, you could actually stroll into your local EBX, head held high, and proudly walk up to the counter with your copy of *Extreme Turkey Hunter*, knowing that you were on the bleeding edge of modern digital entertainment.

But mourning for the "good old days" is for suckers and sissies. Besides, if you spend all your time moping, you're going to miss out on the fact that the good old days just might be *right now*. I mean it. And this is my real point. This is the reason I am back on this page. Because between *Oblivion* and *Hellgate* and *Spore* and *Heroes V* and *Auto Assault* and way too many more PC games to list here, I am happier and more confident about the future of PC gaming than I've been in a long time. So join me, friends. Put the sad face away and let me see your jazz hands. The good times are just beginning.

What Jeff doesn't realize is that he's not back at all. This is just part of Hurley's dream, just like Dave said. E-mail him c/o the Dharma Initiative at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

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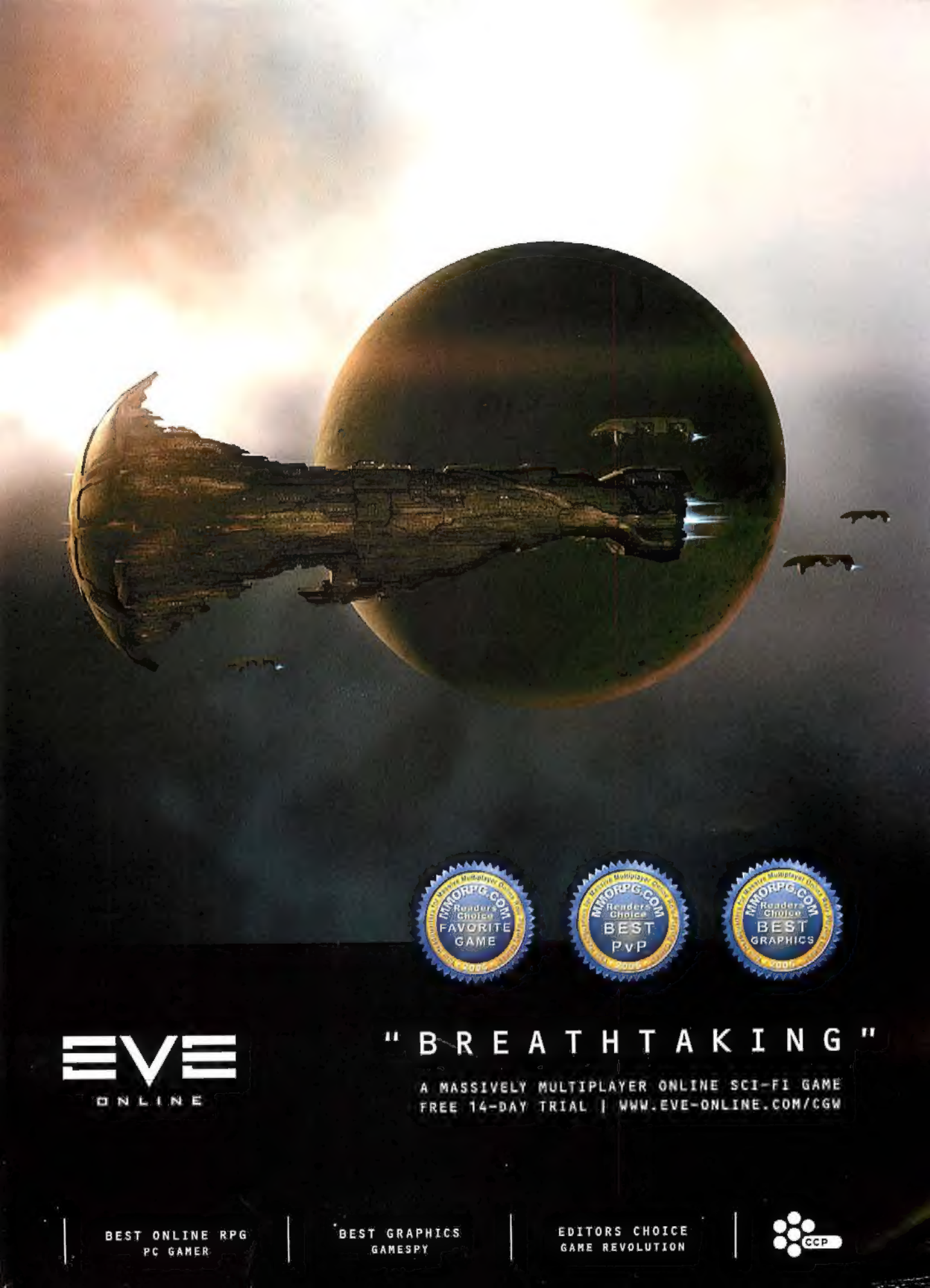
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